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DIFFERENCE

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RUE WITH A DIFFERENCE

BY

ROSA NOUCHETTE CAREY

AUTHOR OF 'NELLIE'S MEMORIES,' 'THE OLD, OLD STORY,' ETC.

'You may wear your rue with a difference'

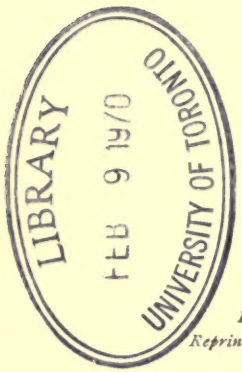
London

MACMILLAN AND CO., LIMITED

NEW YORK: THE MACMILLAN COMPANY

1901

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First printed July 1900
Reprinted October 1900, 1901 (*twice*)

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CHAPTER I

CONCERNS ONE VALERIE

'We have a great deal more kindness than is ever spoken. Maugre all the selfishness that chills like east winds the world, the whole human family is bathed with an element of love like a fine ether.'—EMERSON.

'I MUST confess, my dear Margaret, that I do not understand Valerie,—a complex personality like hers always baffles me,' and here Mrs. Hammond paused and stirred her tea daintily; she was much given to these staccato pauses; they were effective, and served to accentuate a point more clearly.

Mrs. Hammond was having tea with her friend Mrs. Walcott at the Deanery. Evensong was just over at the Cathedral, and the two ladies had met in the porch, where Mrs. Walcott had given her invitation.

They had been schoolfellows in the old days, and though there had been no special tie of sympathy between them, yet when Dr. Walcott was appointed to the Deanery of Wycombe, and Canon Hammond took up his residence in the close, Mrs. Hammond had renewed the old intimacy with her dear Margaret with affectionate eagerness, to which Mrs. Walcott had responded with a tolerant kindness that bordered on indifference.

It was a lovely afternoon in September, and by mutual consent the two ladies had taken a turn up and down the broad lime avenue which led to the west door of the Cathedral. They were both in slight mourning, and as they walked they talked in carefully subdued voices of a certain sad event that had just happened in the close.

Ten days before, the popular and eloquent Canon Thurston had died after a short illness, and great sympathy had been felt throughout the place for the widow and her boy.

Canon Thurston had been twice married, and his daughter by his previous wife had been wandering in Austria and the Tyrol, in complete ignorance of her bereavement.

The second Mrs. Thurston was still a young woman, and was indeed regarded almost as a daughter by the Dean and his wife, and it was of her that Mrs. Hammond was speaking when she made her little protest in the Deanery drawing-room.

No two women could have been more dissimilar. Mrs. Walcott was tall and dignified, but her manner was extremely brusque. People who knew her well soon discovered for themselves that she was excessively shy, and that her brusquerie concealed the gentlest and kindest heart in the world.

In person she was plain, and with the exception of her eyes, which were very clear and expressive, her face had not a redeeming feature, but every one allowed that her smile was lovely. She was very intellectual, and knew more than most women, but it seemed the object of her life to conceal from every one the extent of her learning.

She was extremely reticent and rather silent of

tongue, and it was a known fact that she had only one confidant to whom she could speak freely of her feelings, and everything in heaven and earth; and only the Dean, and perhaps Valerie Thurston, knew the real Margaret Walcott.

Mrs. Hammond, on the contrary, was a pretty little woman, full of life and vivacity, and as harmless as a busy tongue, an inquisitive mind, and a restless brain would allow her to be; she was certainly no fool, and her good nature was proverbial; but she was wanting in depth, and sadly unbalanced, and it must be owned that her friends and well-wishers often made merry at her expense, and 'the last Hammond craze' was quite an *on dit* in the close.

One of the minor Canons once remarked rather wittily that Mrs. Hammond's conversation always reminded him of a badly arranged library, where one could never find the book one wanted, unless one was smothered with dust in the search.

'There is plenty of information to be got,' he went on, 'only it is hopelessly congested and in a state of confusion. Poor little body! she is always talking about the higher education of women, and a hundred other big subjects, but she has not the faintest idea that she is only a sciolist.'

'Only a what, Cecil?' for the minor Canon had a young wife, to whom he was holding forth on this occasion.

'Only a sciolist—a smatterer—lots of women are nothing else,' returned Mr. Mervyn with masculine arrogance. 'I give you my word, Blanche, I always know Mrs. Hammond's latest craze, and can label it at once. Last winter it was philanthropy. I beg her pardon, altruism and the submerged tenth; she even

tackled the Bishop himself when he dined at the Deanery. Just now it is mental physiology,' and here the minor Canon expounded the meaning of that formidable word to his young bride; for under some circumstances even ignorance is charming, and on the head of a pretty dunce even a fool's-cap may be an attractive form of head-gear.

Young Mrs. Mervyn was certainly not an intellectual young woman, nevertheless the Rev. Cecil Mervyn still considered himself the luckiest of mortals, and would not have exchanged his wife for the choicest specimen of up-to-date womanliness that Girton and Newnham and Lady Margaret's Hall combined could have produced.

But *revenons à nos moutons*, and the Deanery drawing-room.

'I repeat, Margaret, that our dear Valerie is a complete enigma to me,' and Mrs. Hammond leant back in her chair with a judicial air, which contrasted oddly with her round face and dimples, which always gave one the idea of a baby trying to look severe.

Mrs. Walcott smiled.

'In my opinion Valerie is perfectly simple,' but this quiet remark only roused Mrs. Hammond to fresh energy.

'Simple! My dear Margaret, what do you mean? Valerie is inexplicable. She has lost one of the best and most devoted of husbands—the dear Canon, heaven bless him, has been dead nearly a fortnight, and yet she shuts herself up and refuses the sympathy of her oldest friends.'

'I thought you and Valerie were together yesterday afternoon,' returned Mrs. Walcott in her slow, deep voice; and then Mrs. Hammond coloured slightly. 'I

certainly saw you cross the green as the Dean and I were stepping into the carriage. I went across after dinner, but Palmer told me that she was lying down with a bad headache, so I would not disturb her; but I shall go this evening.'

'Oh, of course I saw her,' replied Mrs. Hammond, but her voice was resentful; 'but one might as well have tried to talk to that statue,' pointing to a beautiful figure of Hebe that adorned a recess in the Deanery drawing-room.

'Valerie does not need our sympathy; she made no response when I kissed her. I could not help crying a little, seeing her in her black dress, and thinking of the dear Canon; but, would you believe it, she was quite calm and composed, asked me to sit down, and thanked me for calling, and then began to speak of the weather, and said, "What a fine September we were having." Do you suppose if dear Gilbert were to die that I should entertain my friends by talking of the weather.'

'My dear Charlotte, you are too hard on Valerie. You must allow for differences of temperament. Valerie is not an emotional woman; on the contrary, she is extremely reserved, and does not find it easy to talk of herself and her feelings.'

'Yes—but the weather and the harvest—it was barely seemly.' Then Mrs. Walcott with difficulty repressed a smile.

'Poor thing, she was thinking of Pansy; did I tell you, they have at last succeeded in obtaining her address? they telegraphed yesterday, but she cannot possibly arrive for the next three or four days. Valerie owned to me that the thought of Pansy in trouble and away from home weighed on her heavily. She and

Pansy are devoted to each other, and then Pansy was so fond of her father.'

'Yes, poor man, we all know that, and that he spoiled her dreadfully; the idea of letting her wander about in such outlandish places with those scatter-brained friends of hers, and no possibility of communicating with her,—it may be Bohemian and up to date; but in my opinion it is heathenish. Well, I must go now, for Gilbert has an old college friend coming to dinner,' and then Mrs Hammond kissed her friend effusively on both cheeks, which Mrs. Walcott bore with outward submission and inward rebellion.

'I wonder if Charlotte will ever be grown up,' she said to herself as she sat down in her favourite chair by the window overlooking the garden. 'Matrimony and motherhood have not matured her, and she is as girlish and wanting in balance as ever. When I think of those five little girls, all so dear and pretty, I am almost tempted to envy her,' and here a sorrowful shade crossed Mrs. Walcott's strongly-marked face. No lot on earth is quite perfect, and in spite of wedded bliss, and a rare union of taste and sympathy, there were no children at the Deanery; and only God, who knows what passes in the hearts of childless women, can comfort them under such circumstances.

Margaret Walcott in her early married life had yearned passionately for a son; but she had the fortitude and the reticence of a Spartan woman, and it was long before her husband guessed at her secret pain. Then he spoke a few words that were very solemn and comforting.

'Margaret, it is God's will; we have our cross to carry, like every other child of Adam,' and then, as he saw the sadness of her face, for just then she was ill

and weak, he put his hand on her head. 'Am not I better to thee than ten sons,' he whispered tenderly, and then with a strong word of blessing he left her; but Margaret, who knew her husband's heart, could not restrain her tears. 'He is so good,' she whispered to herself; 'he will never let me know how much he longs for a child of his own, but I can see it when the little ones crowd round him, he is so tender with them, and he understands their little ways, "but it is the will of God," and he will not say a word. Alwyn is so noble; he is a thorough Christian; he is strong, and he wants me to be strong too,' and then as the years passed on there was no more passionate resistance to the inevitable. In her shy way she tried to mother the younger choir boys. 'Mrs. Walcott is the jolliest old lady possible,' Ned Plunkett would say sometimes to his companion. 'She is a brick, and no mistake,' which was dubious praise, seeing that the Dean's wife had only just passed her forty-seventh year, and that there were only a few grey streaks in her abundant dark hair. The evening sunshine fell pleasantly on the smooth green lawn of the old Deanery garden, and on the trim flower-beds, and Mrs. Walcott still sat on, drinking in the sweetness and fragrance of the hour. A sort of hush and stillness of repose seemed brooding over everything, the distant hum of the old city hardly seemed to break the silence, and the long-drawn notes of the anthem still lingered in her ears: 'Commit thy way unto the Lord and He will bring it to pass.' Rosy-cheeked Ned had sung it in his silvery tones, and Mrs. Walcott had closed her eyes for a moment as that pure young voice had pealed through the choir, for it had seemed to her as though heaven had opened, and that some stray angel had taken his place among them.

Mrs. Walcott was not a woman given to reverie, her nature was far too energetic, and she was too healthy minded to indulge largely in retrospection, but there are times when even strong natures need to pause and brace themselves afresh ; and on this evening past memories rose vividly before her—her happy studious girlhood in her beautiful northern home, her first sight of the grave young Rector, who afterwards became her husband, and the perfect idyll of that short courtship.

Could any wife be more to her husband, she thought, and then her eyes glistened, for she knew whose footstep was passing down the corridor, and she rose quickly from her chair as the Dean entered. 'You are late, Alwyn,' she said, greeting him with the smile that always seemed to him to light up the old rooms like sunshine ; 'Mrs. Hammond has been having tea with me, and we have finished long ago ; shall I ring and tell Lockhart to make some fresh for you?'

'There is no need for that, my dear, Lloyd and I had ours together in the library—we had so much to do that I could not get to Evensong, but *Laborare est orare*,' and the Dean looked thoughtfully at a blackbird skimming across the grass.

Mrs. Walcott was a tall woman, but she looked short beside her husband. Every one in Wycombe said that their Dean was the most grand-looking man in the diocese ; he carried himself with a great deal of stateliness, and as he walked from his stall to the lectern or pulpit, strangers to the Cathedral would regard him with awe—and yet no man could be less mindful of his own dignity. His features were finely chiselled, and certain enthusiastic female worshippers among the congregation declared that Dean Walcott's

face was absolutely perfect, and that it reminded them of a certain picture of the beloved apostle St. John: but his wife always smiled when she heard this. 'I would rather compare him to Nathaniel,' she would say, 'he is so absolutely simple and without guile—"without guile," I do so love that expression.' The Dean was only a year or two older than his wife, but years of thought and mental labour had silvered his hair; like her he was a little silent in mixed company, but there was a latent power about him that made itself felt; the younger clergy held him greatly in awe, and at their first interview would be as embarrassed as though they were schoolboys, but his quiet genial manner soon set them at their ease.

'I wish I had your gift of saying exactly the right thing in the right place, Alwyn,' his wife said to him once a little piteously, 'you make friends wherever you go. When I want to be kind I only seem to repel people—they don't seem to understand that I am as frightened of them as they are of me; if I could only say nice little things to them; oh, don't smile, Alwyn, it is a real trouble and humiliation. Only yesterday, when Cecil Mervyn called, I did so want to befriend his pretty little wife—why, she looks a mere child, I wonder her mother allowed her to be married—but while we talked I saw her look across at her husband in quite an alarmed way, as though she wanted him to come to her help.'

'She is certainly very pretty,' returned the Dean rather complacently—for he considered himself a judge of beauty; 'and Mervyn is absurdly proud of her—' but just then they were interrupted, and Mrs. Walcott failed to receive the comfort she had so fully expected.

When Dean Walcott uttered his favourite axiom,

'*Laborare est orare*'—which was for ever on his lips—his wife looked at him rather scrutinisingly. 'You are tired or troubled about something, Alwyn,' she said presently, as she slipped her hand through his arm—even with her husband she was not a demonstrative woman, and perhaps her rare caresses made them more precious to him, the perfect understanding between them rendered even words, at times, unnecessary. 'Yes, you are certainly very tired,' she repeated, and the softness and harmony of her deep voice was like music to him.

'No, dear; I have done nothing to fatigue myself, but both Lloyd and I are very much troubled. It is as we feared, Margaret, poor Thurston's affairs are in a terribly involved state; he was a bad business man, we all knew that, but things are worse than even Lloyd guessed. Valerie will only have her marriage settlement, and there will be next to nothing for Ronald—' then Mrs. Walcott uttered an ejaculation of dismay.

'Impossible! oh, Alwyn, what can you mean? that is only about a hundred and fifty a year.'

'Yes, but Pansy has her little fortune, no one was able to touch that; Lloyd says it is rather more than three hundred a year; if they club together they could manage tolerably well, but of course, poor things, after the luxury of the last few years it will seem utter poverty.'

'Poverty! I should think so,' returned his wife, 'and then when Pansy marries, what will Valerie do? Oh, it does seem so hard,' and in her earnestness Mrs. Walcott pressed her husband's arm; 'think of it, dear, they have all been used to such comforts—carriages and horses, and the pony for Ronald, and all that new furniture, and the best of everything always; do you remember

Valerie's velvet gown, and her new necklace, when we dined at Combe Hall, last March?'

'Yes, I know; but we are none of us faultless, my love. You see, Thurston never could forget that he was a rich man's son. When his first wife was alive, Lloyd tells me, they were certainly in opulent circumstances, but that owing to mismanagement and other causes—unsound investments and one or two such hobbies—his fortune dwindled sadly. When he married again his affairs were already much involved, and it was with difficulty that Lloyd could get him to make even that small settlement. I do not suppose for a moment,' continued the Dean with energy, 'that Thurston was aware how things were going. He was the most unbusiness-like man I ever knew—many clergymen are, I am afraid—and he had never been used to deny himself any luxury. If he would only have listened to Lloyd, and faced things like a man, but moral courage was not his strong point. Many of us may say *mea culpa* to that, and so the poor Canon never quite grasped the situation.'

'But it was wrong,' returned Mrs. Walcott, who had listened to this long explanation in silence; 'it was terribly wrong. In these cases the innocent always suffer for the guilty. I always knew Valerie had her anxieties, though she was not the woman to talk of them. She will not say much now, but what will she do about Ronald?' then at the mention of the boy the husband and wife exchanged a glance that was full of significance.

'He is your godson, Alwyn,' she said almost in a whisper. Then the Dean nodded with a relieved air, as though he felt himself understood.

CHAPTER II

THE TELEGRAM FROM PANSY

'Mankind all suffer alike, but some know how to conceal their troubles better than others.'

'Life indeed must be measured by thought and action, not by time.'—SIR JOHN LUBBOCK.

THE last faint beams of the dying sunset had just faded away, and the soft greyness of the September twilight was brooding over the quiet close when Mrs. Walcott crossed the green that lay between the Deanery and the Thurstons' house.

The servant who admitted her said that his mistress was in the garden, but when he offered to go in search of her Mrs. Walcott shook her head. 'I will join her there by and by if she does not come in,' she returned quietly, 'but I should prefer to wait for her a few minutes in the drawing-room'; but Palmer, who was an old servant, and had his privileges, still lingered a moment.

'There has been a telegram from Miss Pansy, ma'am,' he observed, as he placed a chair for the visitor. Then Mrs. Walcott looked at him with sudden interest.

'Indeed, Palmer, I am very thankful to hear that. It will be a great relief to your mistress's mind.'

'Yes, ma'am, but I doubt that it has upset her a

bit, for there is no making out the message clearly. All that we can gather is that Miss Pansy is coming back on either Tuesday or Thursday.'

'To-day is Wednesday,' returned Mrs. Walcott quickly; 'why, she may be here to-morrow night. Oh no, Palmer, that is hardly possible; Miss Pansy must surely mean next Tuesday.'

'Begging your pardon, ma'am, I believe my mistress fully expects her to-morrow. Mr. Lloyd was here an hour ago, and he told us that if Miss Pansy travelled night and day she could easily arrive between nine and ten to-morrow, or even earlier. I should be sorry both for my mistress's sake and Miss Pansy's also, if Mr. Lloyd is wrong,' and here Palmer sighed deferentially and withdrew, while Mrs. Walcott walked to the window and looked across the lawn somewhat eagerly to the trellised rose walks beyond. The next moment she caught sight of a slim figure in black pacing slowly down the dim leafy arcade and coming in the direction of the house. It paused under the last arch, as Mrs. Walcott stepped out of the window, and then with a more rapid step crossed the grass.

'It was too dark to see you clearly,' observed a voice that even at that distance was very clear and sweet; 'for the moment I was half afraid that it was Mrs. Hammond, and I had quite enough of her yesterday,' and here a low laugh, that was not exactly mirthful, reached Mrs. Walcott's ears, then a cold, soft little hand touched her.

'The dew is very heavy, Valerie. I hope your shoes are not damp,' and Mrs. Walcott's kind, motherly voice expressed some concern. 'You must not be reckless of your health, dear,' and again the same nervous little laugh answered her.

'When one is strong as a horse what does it matter, dear Mrs. Walcott, and how is one to wait for twilight in an empty house?—ah, there is Palmer lighting the lamps, don't let us go in until he has finished. I believe if the judgment day were come Palmer would still consider it his bounden duty to light the lamps at a certain hour.'

Mrs. Walcott wondered for a moment what Mrs. Hammond would have said to this flippant little speech, then she said quietly, 'Where is Ronald? I certainly never expected to find you all alone this evening.'

'Ron has gone round to Mr. Carfax,' returned Mrs. Thurston, 'to fetch a book he wanted, and I suppose they have kept him, or he has forgotten the time. Oh, I am not afraid of my own company; solitude is very good for one sometimes. There, Palmer has finished his illumination, so we had better go in. Do you mind my extinguishing two of the lamps?—I do so hate to hurt the dear old man's feelings, but this blaze is intolerable,' and though Mrs. Thurston did not raise her voice in the least, the vibrating pain in her low tones spoke of the irritability of over-wrought nerves and of heavy pressure on heart or brain.

Mrs. Walcott offered no objection. She sat silent and patient, while the widow extinguished one light after another, leaving only the centre lamp, which diffused a soft moony light that was very restful and pleasant to tired eyes.

Under the glamour of the half-veiled light Valerie Thurston looked a mere girl; the slight graceful figure and somewhat small oval face lent themselves to this illusion, but even in daylight she looked much younger than her real age.

In reality Mrs. Thurston was nearly two-and-thirty,

and she had been married twelve years at least, and there had been hours in her life when she had felt as though the years of her age had been double. 'If a woman is as old as she feels,' she had once said to her husband, 'I must certainly be sixty.' Canon Thurston, who had always discouraged these reckless speeches, had taken no apparent notice of this remark, but Valerie quite understood that her husband's sermon on the following Sunday—on exaggeration and dissipation in speech—was preached at her, and had listened with some amusement and a little indignation to what Mrs. Hammond had called a very fine and useful sermon.

'The dear Canon had us all there,' Mrs. Hammond had whispered to her with placid good nature as they passed out of the porch together. 'I am afraid we women use our little members far too much,' but Valerie had made no audible reply. She was human enough to dislike her husband's method of argument; when they disagreed on some point, she thought it would have been far better to talk it out face to face than for her to furnish texts for his next discourse. It went against her notions of fair dealing, and made her realise the disadvantage of her position; it seemed to put her at an immeasurable distance from him, as though she were trying to see him through a blinding snowstorm of truisms and platitudes, uttered in a full, sonorous voice that reached the most distant member of his congregation.

Valerie Bevan had been a pretty girl when Canon Thurston had electrified his neighbours by marrying her, and she was pretty still. The pure oval of her face and the creamy whiteness of her complexion were certainly beautiful in their way, but there was character

and intellect as well as mere prettiness in the features. Perhaps the lips closed too firmly at times, but the eyes were gentle and full of expression, though in moments of deep feeling or intolerable pain the whole face seemed to harden into immobility and utter passivity, as though some inward force compelled her to repress all outward show of emotion. After all, Mrs. Hammond's resentful comparison of Valerie to the marble figure of Hebe was by no means inapt or exaggerated; but Mrs. Thurston's step-daughter Pansy had found another expression for this reserve that was more trite and homely. She always spoke of it as 'pulling down the blinds and bolting the doors'; but then Pansy was a humorist in a small way.

Mrs. Thurston wore a black dress, and the white collar and cuffs which were considered part of a widow's dress, but this was her sole concession to conventionality.

She had already appeared at the Cathedral in her close little black bonnet—'which any one could have worn,' Mrs. Hammond had indignantly declared; but on this point Valerie had been extremely firm.

'What does it matter?' she had said impatiently, when Mrs. Walcott had gently remonstrated with her. 'Do you and Mrs. Hammond suppose that a woman cannot grieve for her husband properly unless she has yards of crape floating behind her to make her a spectacle for men and angels? We have abolished suttees, and yet we retain these obsolete and heathenish customs.' And there had been such intense pain in Valerie's voice that her friend had not dared to say more.

While Valerie made her little arrangements for her own and her friend's comfort, Mrs. Walcott leant back

in her luxurious chair and watched her with kind, sorrowful eyes: the experience of life and a good heart had taught her many useful lessons that some women are slow to learn. She was always ready to receive confidence, but she never forced it; and she had found out the benefit of silence and waiting in patience. Two aphorisms of the wise and witty Carmen Sylva were often on her lips: '"It is not sufficient to observe men; it is necessary to feel them in their heart." That is so true,' she would say, 'people are always judging others from the outside and not from the inside; they feel the pulse, but they cannot hear the heart-beats; they are too far off for that. But there is another saying that is even truer: "By too much talk the gold of our thoughts is so turned into small change that we appear poor"; isn't that splendid, Alwyn? there is a whole essay wrapt up in that sentence.'

Mrs. Walcott was quite aware that Valerie's unusual restlessness betokened a mind ill at ease, but any injudicious questioning, or even the least expression of sympathy bordering on pity, would make her shrink up like a sensitive plant; but she was inwardly relieved when at last the chair beside her was occupied, and Valerie said quite naturally—

'I suppose Palmer told you our news?'

'Yes, indeed. I am so glad the dear child will soon be with you, but Palmer seemed to think there was some uncertainty about the date of her arrival.'

'Oh no, nothing of the kind,' returned Valerie with decision; 'the telegram said Tuesday, I am quite sure of that, but I am equally sure that she will arrive to-morrow.'

'I can hardly follow you there,' observed Mrs. Walcott in a perplexed voice. Then Valerie faintly smiled.

'It sounds absurd, but there is method in my madness. Don't I know Pansy? Do you suppose she will give herself time for proper rest? She will just travel night and day until she reaches us, and then, poor little soul, she will be too dazed and worn-out to speak to us.'

'Ah, just so; one could not expect otherwise. Valerie, my dear, if you take my advice you will refuse to talk to her until she has slept off her fatigue.' Then again there was the dreary flicker of amusement in the widow's eyes.

'Dear friend, how little you know Pansy; if she is in the mood for talk, how is one to silence her? It is easy to hold one's tongue, but, after all, one must think what is best for her. It must have been so dreadful being among strangers when—when that news reached her.'

'Yes, dear, I know,'—and Mrs. Walcott was much touched. Valerie, who was so dumb on the subject of her own bereavement, could be eloquent enough on Pansy's trouble.

'I cannot get her out of my head,' she went on in a low voice, indicative of strong but restrained feeling. 'She and her father were so bound up in each other; he could never find fault with her, and was absolutely blind to her imperfections. When I wake up in the night I lie and wonder how she will bear it all—the loss of the petting and comfort, and everything—oh, you know what I mean!' and Valerie clasped and unclasped her hands nervously. 'If I could only bear it all for her and Ronald—but that is the worst of life,

there is no possibility of shielding one's nearest and dearest from trouble.'

'No, I am afraid not,' replied Mrs. Walcott in her full deep voice, 'but we can all help to carry each other's burdens. My dear, will you allow me to ask you something?—it is no idle curiosity that prompts me to put the question. I know Mr. Lloyd has been with you this evening, and I am afraid he has brought you bad news.'

'Nothing that I did not know beforehand, returned Valerie,' but there was a little constraint in her voice. 'Of course Alban told me about those investments—or I found it out, and asked him, it does not matter which. Mr. Lloyd was quite surprised and relieved to find that I was prepared for anything—"forewarned is forearmed," how often I have said this to myself.'

Mrs. Walcott looked grave, and only the dim light hid the concern in her eyes.

'My poor Valerie, I had no idea of this. The Dean and I were talking over things just now, and we were both so afraid that all this would be a terrible shock to you; indeed, I never saw my husband so troubled about anything.'

'He—you are both very kind,' returned Valerie, and her voice was not quite steady; 'but it was no shock to me, I assure you; even if Alban had been spared to me we should have been obliged to curtail our expenses. He had been badly advised, and he was too trustful—and—oh, it is no use talking,' interrupting herself. 'I suppose that we all believe in an overruling Providence, and after all my boy and I will not actually be paupers.'

'No, indeed. And then Pansy has her little fortune,'—but here Mrs. Thurston checked her somewhat abruptly.

'Pansy's money is her own; we have no claim to it. If she chooses to do anything for her brother I shall not refuse her help, but she must offer it of her own free will.'

'Ronald will not want for friends,' returned Mrs. Walcott rather significantly, 'you know that his godfather'—but again Valerie interrupted her; indeed, as Mrs. Walcott afterwards observed to her husband, 'if a friend is one who can finish your sentences for you, Valerie had certainly proved herself one with a vengeance. On the subject of Ronald she would not suffer me even to open my lips,' she finished rather ruefully.

'We will not talk about Ronald just now,' went on Valerie hurriedly, 'things will arrange themselves by and by. I am already turning over matters in my mind; it is better to make plans than to brood over trouble, and it helps to pass the time. Do you know,—' with a curl of her lip,—'Mrs. Hammond recommended me to do fancy-work. She said counting the stitches was so soothing to the nerves; I am afraid I rather shocked her by telling her that I had no nerves. It is the old Adam, I suppose, but I take a pleasure in shocking her. Oh, why are the generality of people so devoid of tact? How can one open one's heart to a woman like Mrs. Hammond? One might as well try to open an oyster by tickling it with a feather.'

'My dear Valerie!'

'Oh, I have shocked you now,' in rather a remorseful voice; 'but ever since Mrs. Hammond's visit I have felt so sore and exasperated. It was not so much what she said as her method of saying it that aggravated me so. The horrible emptiness and hollowness—of that sort of comfort; it reminded me of two people

speaking in different tongues in a dense fog. "I held my tongue and kept silence," how those words came to me. If I had spoken there would have been a breach between us for ever.'

'I am sorry to hear you speak like this. Poor Charlotte is really a kind-hearted woman, and I know how much she feels for you.'

'You feel for me too,' returned Valerie more gently, 'and you never for one instant rub me up the wrong way. You are so dear and patient, you try to hide from me how much my want of confidence disappoints you. Do you think I do not know that. But words—what are words after all between such close friends,' and then for one brief instant Valerie's hand rested lightly on Mrs. Walcott's. 'Oh, you are such a comfort to me—even if I cannot bring myself to talk, I like to know you are beside me.'

'I am glad you feel like that, dear. But I am afraid I must really go now. I promised that I would be back in time to pour out my husband's coffee. You know his ways—when he has work to finish he likes a cup of coffee late. I wish Ronald had come in before I left you, but he will not be long now.'

'Oh no, he will not be long,' and then the two friends exchanged a quiet kiss, and afterwards Valerie put on her hat and the two women walked across the grass, under the spreading elms, and parted silently at the gate of the Deanery.

CHAPTER III

RONALD APPEARS ON THE SCENE

'We read of and admire the heroes of old, but every one of us has to fight his own Marathon and Thermopylæ; every one meets the Sphinx sitting by the road he has to pass; to each of us, as to Hercules, is offered the choice of vice or virtue; we may, like Paris, give the apple of life to Venus, or Juno, or Minerva.'—SIR JOHN LUBBOCK.

As Mrs. Thurston re-entered her own house, she heard hasty footsteps behind her, and the next moment Ronald appeared, looking hot and out of breath as though he had been running.

'You are late, dear,' she observed a little absently. 'Mrs. Walcott has been here, and has only just gone.'

'Yes, I know,' returned the boy quickly. 'I was talking to old Giles at the porter's lodge, and I saw you both at the Deanery door. It was not my fault, mother,' and Ronald put his arm round her coaxingly. 'Mrs. Carfax made me stay to supper, and she kept me ever so long afterwards asking me questions. She was awfully kind, but I wanted to get away,' and here there was a slight huskiness in Ronald's voice, that at any other time would have attracted his mother's notice, but just then her mind was occupied.

Ronald Thurston was a fine-grown lad of eleven, who looked older than his age; by some freak of nature he had

not inherited his father's handsome face or his mother's good looks ; he was said by some rather to resemble his great-great-grandfather, a certain Sir Ralph Thurston, whose picture hung in the late Canon's study, and who had distinguished himself at the bar, and had been a legal light in his generation. Ronald was dark-complexioned, and had Sir Ralph's strongly-marked features, and, young as he was, there were indications of power and intellect in the low broad forehead, the face, indeed, was full of character. The Dean, who was very proud of his godson, always declared that Ronald would one day make his mark, 'and he will be a good-looking fellow too when he has outgrown his lankiness,' he would observe ; 'just now he is too mature for his age. Sir Ralph was a grand-looking man, in spite of his small size, and that ridiculous wig, and then Ronald has his mother's eyes' ; and this opinion was very gratifying to Mrs. Thurston.

There was no doubt of Ronald's capacity ; he took to his lessons as a duckling takes to the water, and he absorbed knowledge with the easy digestion of a young ostrich, but it was this very facility that was Ronald's chief stumbling-block.

One day, when Ronald had been a year or so younger, the Dean had sent for him to his study, and had placed with some gravity a shining sovereign in the boy's hand, then he drew the lad between his knees.

'Do you know why I have given you that sovereign, Ronald,' he asked. Then Ronald wrinkled his forehead, and looked a trifle bored. He was charmed with his godfather's liberality, and full of gratitude for the gift, but the question bothered him.

'You wanted to be kind to me, I suppose, sir, and

of course I am ever so much obliged to you. I was about cleaned out,' he continued frankly; 'they are always wanting grub, those fellows at Carfax's, and if you don't give in to them they call you mean.'

'Ah, the fellows of my time were much the same,' returned the Dean, with a twinkle in his eye. 'Well, you are right, Ronald. I wanted to show you that we were friends, and to make things comfortable between us, and now I am going to deliver my lecture,' and there and then with much plainness of speech Dr. Walcott had his say.

As the lecture proceeded Ronald felt himself a little injured. If godfathers and godmothers considered moral dissertations and rapping one's knuckles to be part of their daily duties, he for one would be very willing to be deprived of sponsors. Then he looked at the shining coin in his hand, and felt that he had been sufficiently bribed, and after all he both loved and venerated the Dean.

'I suppose mother's been complaining of me,' he said, in rather a sulky tone, for though a good dispositioned boy Ronald had his faults of temper.

'Why should it not have been your father,' returned the Dean tentatively, but Ronald's lip curled at this.

'Oh, Dad never bothers a fellow about his lessons. You see, sir, it is like this; Dad agrees with me that if one knows one's work it does not matter the least how it is done. Now, I like doing things at a full galop; it is ever so much more exciting. I never could be like that Harry in *Sandford and Merton*, he was too much of a prig for me. I wish you would understand what I mean, Mr. Dean,' and here Ronald laid rather a grubby paw on his friend's arm; 'it is so awfully jolly to leave

things until the last moment and then work at them like a nigger. Mother says it puts her in a fever to see me at my work.' But before the Dean had finished his kind homily Ronald was brought to a better state of mind.

In talking of this interview afterwards with Mrs. Thurston, Dr. Walcott spoke with the utmost tenderness of the boy.

'He is a fine little fellow,' he said, 'but his very cleverness leads him into temptation; it encourages him to be indolent. I have talked it out with him, and he has promised to be more regular and painstaking, and I believe he will keep his word.' But when he was alone the Dean had sighed rather heavily, as he thought of the boy standing between his knees, and the childish hand, not over clean, that had pressed his arm. If only he and his Margaret had had a son like Ronald!

Valerie was too much absorbed with her own sad thoughts that evening to notice Ronald's unusual silence. He was devoted to his mother, and extremely confidential with her, and in his boyish way he was always mindful of her little comforts; the strongest bond of love and sympathy united the mother and son, but that night Ronald seemed anxious to avoid conversation.

'I think I will go to bed, mother,' he said, 'stifling a yawn,' and then Valerie glanced at the timepiece.

'Why, it is later than I thought,' she returned in some surprise; 'yes, go, darling, and I will ring and tell Palmer that he may shut up'—and then Ronald kissed her and rushed away, and after a few moments Valerie followed him upstairs, but she did not enter her bedroom.

There was a small room leading out of it that was

appropriated to her use; it had been her husband's bridal gift to her, and as he had furnished it with excellent taste, it was certainly a charming little sitting-room. Valerie always called it her dressing-room, for she disliked the word boudoir; but the affairs of the toilet were by no means carried on there, but in this quiet retreat she read and wrote and kept her household accounts. The window was a pleasant one; she could look across the green to the Deanery, and beyond that to Canon Gifford's house and the grey walls of the Cathedral.

The view was always inexpressibly peaceful to her, and even twelve years had not familiarised her with the beauty.

'There is always some new effect to be seen,' she would say to her friend Mrs. Walcott; 'one sees it in sunshine, or moonlight, or starlight, and it is different and yet always the same; sometimes the elms are bare, and at other times they are clothed with verdure, yet in winter and summer, spring and autumn, the glorious old Cathedral broods over us from year's end to year's end, majestic and beautiful.'

As Valerie sat down in her accustomed place she looked across at the grey walls and pinnacles, and her eyes were full of sadness—twelve years, and it had come to this. And then as she thought of the newly-made grave and the blackened wreaths still lying on it, she put her hand to her throat, as though something impeded her breathing. 'She looks as though she had not shed a tear,' Mrs. Hammond had said in a complaining voice; and it was true—since her husband's death Valerie had shed no tears.

To-night she was restless, and her busy thoughts were reviewing the past, taking swift flights over the

years, like a bird flying over an empty harvest-field, and lighting hither and thither on the stubble.

She remembered her first visit to the Deanery. Her father had been Vicar of Lulworth, a small village about eight or nine miles from Wycombe—Lulworth-in-the-Vale, they called it—but it had been a poor living, and her father had been a poor man ; and yet, until her mother died, could any home have been happier?

The Dean and her father had been at Magdalen together, and Dr. Walcott and his wife had often driven over to Lulworth to spend an hour at their homely vicarage, but her father could seldom be induced to return these visits.

'Walcott is too big a man for me now,' he would say ; 'don't you remember Ebbley Lock, Val, and how our boat rocked when the steamer came in, and you declared that we should be swamped,' and then, with the quiet humour habitual to him, he quoted Benjamin Franklin's lines,—

> Larger vessels venture more,
> But smaller boats should keep near shore—

and though Valerie had argued the point somewhat warmly, Mr. Bevan had invariably refused the kindly hospitality proffered to him. Mr. Bevan was a shy man, and during the latter years of his life this shyness had become a disease ; but the Dean, who loved him and knew the goodness of his heart, bore patiently with his old friend's infirmities. During his long sickness he visited him almost daily, and when he died Mrs. Walcott went over to Lulworth vicarage and stayed with the lonely girl until the funeral was over, and then brought her to the Deanery for a long visit.

'You shall be as quiet as you like,' Mrs. Walcott

had said in her kind sensible way, 'and no one shall interfere with you ; it will give you time to look round and see what you can do,' for both she and the Dean knew that the girl, with the exception of a small pittance, was absolutely penniless.

Valerie thought thankfully of that peaceful harbourage that had sheltered her during these sorrowful days, when she was too heart-sick and confused to formulate any plans for her future.

Could any friends have been more wise and kind? She was free to come and go as she liked—to sit in her little room, or to take her solitary walks ; no one asked her questions or harassed her with well-meaning advice, but at any moment Mrs. Walcott was ready with cheerful talk or loving sympathy. If she had been their own daughter they could not have been kinder to her, Valerie thought, as she remembered those days. When they went abroad they had taken her with them, and the Dean had found a good deal of pleasure in the girl's intelligent companionship.

'She has clear perception and a fine taste, if it had only been cultivated,' he said to his wife once, 'but she has had no advantages, poor child ; still, her freshness is very charming, and I fancy some one else agrees with me there,' and the Dean looked very knowing as he took up his broad-brimmed hat.

It had been arranged that after Christmas Valerie should teach Dr. M'Cormick's children. He was Vicar of Holy Trinity, and had a large family.

The children were too young to need an expensive highly-finished governess for a year or two, and both Mrs. Walcott and Mrs. M'Cormick considered that Valerie could fill the situation for the present.

Her father had grounded her well in Latin and

Euclid, and her mother had taught her French and given her music lessons. 'She will do very nicely for the little ones,' Mrs. M'Cormick had said, 'and I shall take Ella and Sophy myself for music and German. She can teach Harry and Bob Latin; they are such little fellows, and really my husband has no time for their lessons,' and so it was settled. But fate had not ordained that Valerie Bevan should be a governess, for to her own astonishment, and that of the whole close, Canon Thurston had proposed to her, and she had accepted him.

Canon Thurston had only been a widower two years, and a great deal of sympathy had been expressed for him and his motherless child.

Lady Emma had been older than her husband, but she had made him an excellent wife, and had understood him perfectly. He was a man who needed sympathy and appreciation, and she had given him both ungrudgingly; and if the love had been more on her side than his, no one would have suspected it from his manners.

When she died he had mourned for her most truly. 'I have lost my best friend,' he would say with a heavy sigh, and indeed it must be owned that the empty house was dreary enough during those solitary years.

Canon Thurston was a handsome man, and in the prime of life, and the eloquence of his sermons always attracted large congregations to the Cathedral when they knew he was to preach.

Valerie, in the first sadness of her bereavement, had found comfort and spiritual nutrition in these somewhat emotional discourses. The deep melodious voice seemed to stir her sluggish pulses. 'He has such beautiful

thoughts,' she said as she and Mrs. Walcott walked back to the Deanery.

'Yes, he is a fine preacher,' returned her friend; but Valerie, who was extremely sensitive, felt a want of enthusiasm in her tone, and said no more, but she dimly guessed that Mrs. Walcott was no admirer of the Canon's eloquence.

He was a constant visitor at the Deanery, and Valerie was far too young and innocent to suspect the real object of these visits. She was very shy and reserved with him, and could hardly be induced to open her lips when he dined there. But Canon Thurston, who was somewhat *blasé* with the admiration of his female votaries, thought there was something wonderfully attractive in Valerie's girlish modesty and grace. It interested him to interpret the swift shy glance that answered him, and her few words seemed to him pregnant with meaning.

'She is too young to know her own mind,' Mrs. Walcott had said anxiously, when the Dean had informed her of Canon Thurston's intentions. 'Oh, Alwyn, do ask him to give her plenty of time. Valerie is so sensible; but she is not nineteen, and he is eight-and-thirty at least. What does she know of his real character? She sees him through a glamour.'

'There was a time when you saw me through a glamour too,' returned the Dean half jestingly. 'What is falling in love but a glamour or silver haze stretched between two luckless mortals. Don't look so anxious, Margaret. Talk to the child if you will, and tell her to look before she leaps, though Thurston is a good sort of fellow in his way.'

After all, Mrs. Walcott had no opportunity given her. The leap had been already taken, and Valerie,

trembling like a frightened child from head to foot, had promised to be Canon Thurston's wife. The glamour was indeed over her eyes. How could it be otherwise. She was too much overwhelmed, too much carried off her feet, as it were, by his persuasive eloquence to say him nay.

That such a man,—a canon, a dignitary of the Church, a scholar steeped in knowledge and versed in the higher mysteries of the soul, 'the golden-voiced preacher,' as the *Wycombe Courier* called him,—that any being so exalted, so almost divine, should stoop to ask for the love of a little tongue-tied rustic, could a lifetime of devotion repay such goodness?

'I shall only disappoint you,' she had whispered; but her hands were cold with intensity of feeling.

'No, dearest, you will not disappoint me, and we shall make each other very happy,' and then his strong warm hands had pressed hers closely, and, as she looked up at him with shy gratitude, he noticed the pure oval of her face and the delicacy of her complexion, which in its sudden pallor reminded him of a white rose. There was no doubt that Canon Thurston was genuinely in love, and though Valerie had said little about her own feelings, and was almost as silent as ever when the Canon spent the evening with them, yet there had been a brightness in her eyes and a new buoyancy in her step that told their own tale.

The wedding took place early in the year. A modest but sufficient marriage had been provided by Valerie's kind friends at the Deanery. The Bishop had married them, and the Dean had given the bride away; and Pansy, a child about ten years old, had officiated as the solitary bridesmaid.

Pansy, who was a rather out-spoken child, had made one or two singular speeches that day.

'I wonder if mother knows that you are going to be married again, Dad,' she had observed, as she watched him putting on his lavender gloves; 'she mightn't like it much.'

'Hush, my dear child,' he had returned in a shocked tone; 'your dear mother is with the angels, Pansy, and her blessed spirit will rejoice in our happiness.'

Pansy shrugged her shoulders—she would have liked to argue the point. 'Are you sure?—does it say all that in the Bible, Dad?'

'Yes—yes, and a good deal more, but it is time for me to go now,' and then Pansy and her nurse had tripped across to the Cathedral.

CHAPTER IV

DISILLUSION

'There are moods in which we court suffering, in the hope that here, at least, we shall find reality, sharp peaks, and edges of truth.'

EMERSON.

As Valerie reached this point of her retrospect there was a sudden catch in her breath that sounded like a sob, but her eyes were quite dry.

'I was so happy, so happy,' she murmured; 'he was very good to me. Why did I ever wake out of my dream, it was so beautiful while it lasted? Is it my fault that I am different from other women; oh, how often he told me that I expected too much, that my standard was too high—and perhaps he was right. Lady Emma was a good woman, and she was perfectly content,' but here Valerie's whisper died into silence.

Whatever the secret trouble might be that lay upon her soul, it should never be put into speech by her. As far as lay in her power it should be hidden away in the grave of her dead husband; no one should suspect that the bitterest ingredient in her cup of sorrow was the fact that in heart and soul she was not utterly widowed. But even as she told herself this she knew in her inner consciousness that Mrs. Walcott had guessed the truth.

'What does Valerie know of Canon Thurston's

character?' she had said to the Dean, 'she sees him through a glamour'; and he had answered her jestingly, and yet no words had been more true. Valerie, who had been a mere child when she married, knew absolutely nothing of the man whom she had sworn to love, honour, and obey until death should part them.

It is always perilous to idealise any human being; there are feet of clay to be seen in most earthly idols, as grovelling worshippers soon know to their cost, but if they lift their eyes higher there will often be the gleam of nobler metals as well.

Perhaps it was not altogether Canon Thurston's fault, for he was a kind-hearted, impressionable man, but it was soon evident that no two natures could be more utterly dissimilar.

All Valerie's young life had been spent in almost Arcadian simplicity; her father's sincere, child-like nature had been her ideal of masculine virtue; truth in word and truth in action had been his favourite maxims for daily use. 'Be true, be absolutely true, Val,' he would say to her again and again; and then he would tell her that poverty was no shame, and that it was no disgrace for an English gentlewoman to earn her bread —and these simple lessons had sunk deeply into her heart. Valerie's passion for truth amounted almost to a fault; it made her a little hard and disposed to judge others, not outwardly, perhaps—for she was extremely reticent—but inwardly; it shocked her to find that few people cared to live up to her high standard, that, even in the little world around her, conventional lies were regarded as venial sins.

At first her husband laughed at her scrupulosity, then he reasoned with her in a good-natured, dogmatic way. 'We must conform to the ways of the world,

Valerie,' he would say ; 'we are not living in a palace of truth, my dear.' But when she argued the point with him, and he failed to convince her, he would look bored and shrug his shoulders as though he were weary. Valerie's arguments soon ceased, but under her silence there was inward rebellion ; there was no rapt look in her eyes now as she listened to 'the golden-voiced preacher'; the flood of eloquence that had once so moved her now seemed to her mere useless platitudes,—words, words, nothing but words.

'Be true, be absolutely true, Val.' The hot, smarting tears would rise to the young wife's eyes, as her father's speech sounded in her ears, and then that bitter undercurrent of silent unavailing protest would go on, keeping time, as it were, with the preacher's fluent sentences.

Before long Valerie's life was a secret martyrdom ; she found it impossible to reconcile her husband's preaching and practice. He was an emotional man, and his feelings sometimes carried him away ; he would often come back from the Cathedral utterly spent and weary. On these occasions Valerie was always careful of his comforts. She would bring him a glass of wine, or tell Palmer to make up his master's study fire, and these little attentions were always soothing to the Canon's feelings, but none the less he would contrast Valerie's mute helpfulness and Lady Emma's outspoken sympathy, and her words of ready praise.

Sometimes his need of appreciation was so great that he would say a word or two.

'There was a larger congregation than ever this afternoon,' he observed once. 'I am glad the Bishop was there. He said some very kind things to me in the vestry, and it was certainly one of my best sermons.'

'Yes, Alban, and I am very glad the Bishop was

pleased; he is rather a critic, is he not?' and then Valerie moved away, and before he could speak again she was outside the door, but her cheeks were burning, and there was a feverish brightness in her eyes.

'What does it mean?' she said to herself, as she paced up and down the cool hall. 'If Alban believes what he preaches why are we living like this? Spending more than we can afford, and making no difference, even after those heavy losses.'

'Give me neither poverty nor riches,' had been the Canon's text, and he had preached a splendid homily on the virtue of content, contrasting it very finely with the lust for wealth and the sin of covetousness, and more than one business man had felt the 'arrow drawn at a venture' strike him between the joints of his armour.

And yet the previous day, when Valerie had summoned all her courage to remonstrate with him on their lavish expenditure he had been both hurt and indignant.

'I am a good many years older than you, my dear,' he had returned with dignity, 'and I think you can trust your husband to watch over your interests. Women are not good judges in these matters—they think too gravely of a temporary financial embarrassment. It was a bad investment, I grant you that; the whole affair, Derrick tells me, is unsafe and rotten, but a burnt child dreads the fire, and I can promise you not to act cat's-paw again for other people's chestnuts.'

'I am glad to hear you say that, Alban,' she replied meekly, 'but surely under the circumstances it is wiser to retrench a little. There is no need to give that dinner-party, and Ronald can do very well without a pony,'—but she had gone too far.

'You must excuse me, my dear Valerie,' he returned coldly, 'if I decline to enter into this domestic argument. I have already given Huxter the order for the pony; and as for the dinner-party, you will greatly oblige me, my love, if you will write the invitations at once, and submit the list to me.' There was an irritable look in the Canon's eyes as he thus put his foot down, and Valerie withdrew in silence to write her notes, but she carried a sore heart with her.

Valerie was no fool; on the contrary, she was a clever, clear-headed woman. She was perfectly aware that her husband had had considerable losses, and that they could no longer afford their present expenditure.

As far as lay in her power she tried to control the daily expenses; she bought little or nothing for herself, but all her efforts at economy were unavailing. When she refused to get a new dress for herself, her husband punished her by ordering one of the most expensive material.

'I cannot have my wife disgrace me by shabby attire,' he had said in his most dictatorial manner; but Valerie had shed bitter tears over her beautiful dress, and even when Ronald cantered up on his pony, almost beside himself with joy and pride, Valerie's sturdy honesty would hardly permit her to say a word, she could only stroke the pretty creature's glossy mane in silence.

'Truth in action,' and every day life was becoming more impossible, and lines of care were deepening on her husband's face.

'Valerie, you were right and I was wrong,' he said to her when he lay on his dying bed, 'and if I had listened to you it would have been better for both of us,' but she would not let him finish.

'Don't, Alban, it hurts me. I want to ask your forgiveness. I have not been a good wife to you—not —not the wife I meant to be'; then he laid his hand on her bowed head very tenderly.

'My dear,' he said in a trembling voice, 'there is more need for me to ask your forgiveness. I have always loved you dearly, Valerie, and you have been goodness itself to me, but we have not thought alike on any one subject, and your soul has always been in silent revolt against mine; do you think I do not know that?' and then Valerie was silent; at that supreme moment how was she to lie to him?

And another night, as she watched beside him, for they thought the end was near, he lay and looked at her rather strangely.

'What is it, dear,' she said at last. 'Are you in any pain or discomfort?' then he shook his head.

'No; I was only thinking of Ron. He is your boy, Valerie, he takes after you; I am glad of that; he will give you no trouble,' and then, after a long pause: 'I know you will be good to Pansy; dear little Eyebright, I wish I could see her again,' for this was his pet name for her.

'Dear Alban, let me telegraph again,' but he refused this; they had no address and the telegram would not reach her. But in the semi-delirium that preceded the end he thought his daughter was beside him.

'So you have come to see the last of your old father, Sweetheart,' he said feebly; 'good child, good child,' and his hand patted the bedclothes. 'Take care of Ron; don't let the boy suffer for my imprudence; he is a fine lad, and it would make her so unhappy,' and here the dim eyes turned in touching appeal to the silent figure beside him, and just before the last,

as Valerie was stooping over him to wipe the death damp from his brow, she saw him try to fold his wasted hands together—'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before Thee,' he panted, and then his grey head fell against her shoulder, and with that child-like prayer upon his lips he entered the Master's presence.

Yes, it was all over, those years of outward prosperity and inward disillusion; but the widow's heart was breaking with the bitter knowledge that she had been false to her wedded vows, that in her secret heart she had not really loved and honoured her boy's father.

This was not the Alban Thurston who had seemed so god-like to the shy, imaginative girl, or if he were the same man, he was so enwrapped in egotism and pompous verbosity that she had failed to recognise him. The worldly priest, thirsting for popularity, and desiring only to shine before his generation, was not the saintly preacher at whose feet she had secretly sat. 'I have tried to serve God and Mammon, that has been my sin,' he had said to her, and she knew that he had spoken the truth; loaves and fishes, the esteem of his fellows, the greetings in the market-place, had all been dearer to him than self-denial for the truth's sake. No Pharisee of old, with broad phylacteries, had been more arrogant than he. 'Honour me now before the elders of my people,' had been his cry to the last, and yet in spite of this strange moral weakness Canon Thurston had been no hypocrite.

He had been true to her at last, that was the thought that comforted Valerie in those first hours as she knelt in the chamber of death, and the grey dawn ushered in another day; he had been true to her, for once at least they had talked together face to face,

and the thought of that late understanding and mutual forgiveness had deadened the sharpness of her pain.

'Alban,' she whispered, and her hand rested tenderly against the grey hair, 'my poor Alban, you know better now, when we meet again there will be nothing between us,' and it had seemed to her as though there was a smile on the dead lips.

It was late when Valerie rose from her chair, and she felt chill and numb; a sudden terror of the silence of her own loneliness came over her; the household were sleeping, and she alone was waking for sorrow. Even to hear her boy's breathing would be a comfort to her, for her nerves were shaken and she felt it would be impossible to sleep. She would not wake him, she thought, no amount of pain could make her guilty of such selfishness; she would only turn the handle of his door and stand for a moment on the threshold, but as she did so there was a faint sound proceeding from under the bedclothes, as though the sleeper had roused.

Valerie felt her pulses quicken as she stole gently to his bedside; then followed disappointment, her ears had deceived her; after all he was fast asleep. She could see the outline of his face distinctly in the moonlight.

With motherly tenderness she stooped over him to kiss his cheek—nothing ever woke Ronald—then she started, the boy's face was wet, and even as she touched him a tear fell on her hand.

Valerie was not in her normal condition—she was overwrought and almost worn out with painful introspection, and her voice was not under control as usual.

'Ronald,' she cried sharply, 'why are you crying? Tell me at once. I cannot bear this. Why do you

try to deceive me, and pretend to be asleep?' and then all at once her limbs seemed to fail her, and as she sank on the bed her teeth chattered nervously and she shook as though she had the ague. Ronald was aghast.

'Mother, dear, what is it?' he said, sitting up in bed and putting his arms round her. 'Are you ill? Has anything frightened you?' But Valerie only clung speechlessly to him; for the moment she was past words.

Poor Ronald grew more frightened.

'Mother, let me go and fetch some one. There are matches on the drawers, and I will get a light,' but she only held him fast.

'No, no, I am not ill, but I was so unhappy, and then I could not bear that you should pretend to be asleep. Ron, darling, do promise me that you will never, never try to hide anything from me; if you were awake and miserable, why should I not know it? Oh, my boy, my boy, always be true to me,' and the tone of agony went to the boy's heart.

'Why, mother,' he returned, 'don't I always tell you things? If I pretended to be asleep just now it was because I did not want you to be troubled. Put your head on the pillow, mother dear, and I will keep you nice and warm. There, you are ever so much better now,' as the nervous trembling ceased.

'Yes, darling, and I am very comfortable. May I stay like this for a little, Ron? I don't feel as though I can go to bed just yet, and you can tell me why you were crying,' but it was evident Ronald shirked this.

'Won't it do in the morning, mother?'

'Well, I suppose so, but I think I should sleep

better if I knew all about it to-night.' Then Ronald cleared his throat.

'I am afraid you will think me a selfish duffer,' he began in rather a hesitating fashion. 'I am almost ashamed to tell you. I was not thinking of father to-night, but of something Mrs. Carfax said to me,—that, of course, things would be different now, that we should have to leave the house, and that I must work hard. Oh, mother, what did she mean? We shall have plenty of money, shall we not?'

'No, dear, I am afraid not,' and Valerie stroked his hair, 'but I shall know more in a day or two, and when Pansy comes home we can make our plans. I will promise not to hide anything from you, Ron. You shall know all that I know myself, but most certainly we shall have to be careful.'

'Yes, I see—but mother,' and here Ronald caught his breath, 'I was thinking of Ladybird—my own dear Ladybird,' and Ronald's voice was rather choky. 'Oh, mother, do tell me that I may keep her; she is my very own, and father gave her to me, and I do love her so! The very thought of parting with her made me cry.' Then Valerie's heart was very pitiful.

'Ronald, dear,' she whispered, 'I dare not deceive you. From what Mr. Lloyd said to-day, I fear we shall be very poor. The carriage and horses are to be sold, and I fear—I very much fear, darling, that Ladybird will have to be sold too. Oh, my precious boy, don't fret so,' as Ronald broke into a childish sob, 'do you think I would not save you this pain if I could?'

After all it was Ronald who slept first. But Valerie lay there, open-eyed and sad as death, until the faint dawn heralded the advent of a new day. Then she went to her own room and undressed, and snatched

an hour or two of fitful sleep. She must not overtax her nerves. She knew that the evening might bring Pansy, and she would need all her strength. 'I must not think of myself, but of her,' she thought, as the fresh morning air lulled her to repose.

CHAPTER V

MR. LLOYD IS IMPRESSED

'Grief should be
Like joy, majestic, equable, sedate,
Confirming, cleansing, raising, making free;
Strong to consume small troubles; to commend
Great thoughts, grave thoughts, thoughts lasting to
the end.'—AUBREY DE VERE.

VALERIE'S wakeful night had been a bad preparation for a trying day. As she sat at her breakfast the next morning, with the food untasted on her plate, she knew what lay before her. Their lawyer, Mr. Lloyd, was coming for a long business talk. The interview could hardly be a pleasant one. Valerie knew well that her husband's affairs were hopelessly involved, and that, with the exception of her marriage settlement, there was little to come to her and Ronald; but in her state of tension and anxiety it would be a relief to know the worst.

Ronald was hardly a cheerful companion that morning. For the first time in his young life he had been brought face to face with real trouble. It was not only that he had lost a kind indulgent parent, but his little world was in utter chaos.

His mother's mysterious hints the night before, and

the thought that he might be compelled to part with his beloved Ladybird—Ladybird, who followed him like a dog and ate apples out of his pocket—had turned him sick and cold with dismay, and it was only out of consideration for his mother's pale, tired face that he forbore to renew his questions.

'What are you going to do with yourself, Ronald,' she asked as they rose from the table. 'Mr. Lloyd is coming directly, and we shall be very busy until luncheon.' Then Ronald shrugged his shoulders, and stared rather disconsolately out of the window.

'It is a beastly morning,' he observed rather sulkily, 'and Davis declares it is going to rain, but I mean to have a ride for all that,' and then his conscience pricked him, and he made an attempt to be pleasant; 'can I do anything for you in the town, mother?' But she shook her head.

'No, thank you, darling, but I don't think the rain will be much, and a long ride will do you good,' and then, as usual, she stood at the door to see him mount and give Ladybird her sugar. They always went through the same little performance. Valerie would pretend her pockets were empty, and wave her hand gaily in adieu. Then Ladybird would wax irate and stamp her hoofs petulantly and toss her brown mane, and if Ronald tried to mount her she would sidle away from him and prance and dance in the most skittish way until the sugar was produced, and then all was peace and harmony.

'Poor Ronald, it will break his heart to part with his pet,' thought Valerie as she went back to the house; 'he is so young, and he has never known trouble.' Ronald had his luncheon in his pocket, and would probably not be back until tea-time, he said. He was

going to see a schoolfellow who lived in a village some miles away, and he and Ladybird would probably have their dinner at the Grange. Valerie was not sorry to be alone. It was difficult to evade the boy's questions, and yet it was prudent that things should be settled definitely before she explained matters to him. If she could only talk it all over first with Pansy—and then for the hundredth time she wondered if the girl would return that night.

Mr. Lloyd had always had a great respect for Mrs. Thurston. 'She was a sensible, clear-headed woman,' he would say to his wife, but before their interview ended his respect had deepened into admiration.

Valerie's quiet self-restraint had made it less hard for him to discharge a painful duty. He had had bad news to give her, but she had heard it silently and without apparent emotion ; her demeanour had been so calm that he had looked at her sharply once or twice to be sure that she understood him.

'Are you certain that you quite follow my meaning,' he said once, and Valerie had glanced at him in some surprise.

'Oh yes, you have explained things so thoroughly,' was her reply. 'Will you tell the Dean that I am quite willing to be guided by his and your advice. I will talk things over with my daughter. I am sure that she will agree with me that our best plan will be to live at Roadside,'—this was a small house on the Brocklebank Road, which had belonged to the late Canon, and which had been standing empty a long time ; then at the mention of Roadside Mr. Lloyd had given her another penetrating glance, 'could any other woman,' he thought, 'bear her misfortunes as Mrs. Thurston was bearing hers?' That she could bring herself

to speak of leaving her beautiful house for a cottage in the Brocklebank Road was to him a marvel, but the lawyer, in spite of his acuteness, knew little of Valerie's state of mind. The tide of her life's conflict had left her like a battered vessel high and dry on some desolate strand ; the storm was over, but she was worn and shattered, and it mattered little to her what harbourage awaited her. 'I am past all that,' she said to herself, 'it is only for Pansy and Ronald that I mind things. I would rather live at Roadside and earn my bread and owe no man anything, than I would go on living as we used to do,' and then she listened in the same dazed stony fashion as the old lawyer went on with his explanation.

After all, it was very simple, she thought wearily ; at least there were no complications. She was to keep enough furniture for a small house, and the rest was to be sold. There were debts to be paid off and various liabilities to be discharged : the servants wages were in arrears. Some land that had proved a sorry investment was to be sold at once.

'I think we shall be able to satisfy every one,' Mr. Lloyd remarked in a reassuring tone, as though answering Valerie's unspoken anxiety ; 'there is no need for you to trouble yourself on that score, Mrs. Thurston. I believe I have already found a purchaser for that plot of ground. Elkington wants it for building purposes, and will offer you a fair price, and I advise you to close with it.'

'And you are quite sure that all my husband's debts will be paid,' but the widow's tones were almost tragic as she put this question.

'My dear lady, yes ; you need give yourself no concern on that score. Canon Thurston was a little injudicious in that last investment ; if he had only consulted me,

I would have advised him not to touch it; he lost thousands over it, and there is little doubt that his ill-luck preyed on his mind. Well, well, it is a bad business, but we must just make the best of it.'

'Yes, we must make the best of it,' returned Valerie in her grave voice. 'I think I understand all you have told me, Mr. Lloyd. Pansy's three hundred a year is quite safe, and as she is of age she will have the sole control of it, and my boy and I will have Roadside and a hundred and fifty a year; it is not much certainly,' and here the faint flicker of a smile played round her lips, 'but if my husband's debts are all paid I will not complain,'—then her manner changed and became more natural. 'Mr. Lloyd, I want to ask you something. You know the pretty chestnut pony that my husband bought for Ronald last autumn, the poor boy is devoted to his pet; it really breaks his heart to have to part with Ladybird, but there is no stable at Roadside, even if we could afford to keep her. I think Ronald would feel less badly about it if we could find her a good home.'

'Well now, that is rather curious,' returned the lawyer, flecking some dust off his coat sleeve; 'it was only last week that I was up at the Old House, and that Mr. Nugent was telling me that he wanted a quiet safe pony for his little girl.'

'Ladybird would just do for him,' returned Valerie almost eagerly; 'with all her playfulness she is extremely gentle and docile, and she follows Ronald about like a great dog; they are such friends, and it is so pretty to see them together. I think it is worse than anything having to separate those two,' and Valerie's tone was so full of unconscious pathos that the lawyer coughed, and put his papers together rather hastily.

'My dear Mrs. Thurston, it is an excellent idea. I will speak to Mr. Nugent and see what is to be done,—there, I think we have settled everything, in a few days I will let you know what terms we can make with Elkington,' and then Mr. Lloyd bowed himself out, and Valerie went into the garden.

Her head ached, and the fresh air would be a refreshment; there had been a slight drizzling rain, and the paths were damp. It was one of those melancholy autumnal days which occasionally greet one even in September; a few yellow leaves fluttered down from the chestnut, but Valerie felt as though it were more in harmony with her feelings than the golden sunshine of the previous day. The calm breath of approaching change and decay brooded over the old garden, how Valerie had loved it all these years, with its trim lawns and beds of sweet-smelling old-fashioned flowers, its rose walks and vine-draped pergola, the long row of Madonna lilies that was the glory of the June borders, and the bed of forget-me-nots and lilies of the valley in the corner of the kitchen garden, that scented the air in the spring; and then there were Pansy's namesakes, hundreds of them, great beds of yellow and purple heartsease, which in his baby days had been Ronald's delight, and which he always called his 'butterfly flowers.'

Valerie's happiest hours had been spent in her garden, watching her boy at his play, and even now it soothed her to walk there alone. Nature is never unkind to those who love and understand her, who have eyes to discern her beauties, and patience to endure her caprices and changing moods. Valerie's sore heart had found its best comfort in what she termed her 'inner and outer temple'—the world of

nature round her, and the Cathedral, which had ever been to her her holy of holies.

How often, as a young mother, she had paced those walks with her baby boy toddling beside her. She remembered how one day he came to her full of childish woe, with a broken-winged moth in his hand. 'Oh, mammie, it is quite deaded,' he had said to her so piteously; but she had comforted him greatly by proposing they should have a funeral.

She smiled now to think of that little scene, so absurd, and yet so full of pathos, and Ronald's solemn face as she buried the little cardboard box under the moss.

'Will the moth turn to an 'ittle 'ittle boy-angel,' asked Ronald, 'and f'y about in 'eaven?' But before Valerie could answer this embarrassing question his attention was happily diverted by the sight of a long worm wriggling across the path.

Now Ronald hated worms,—'crawlers,' as he called them,—and he made a gesture of disgust. 'Nasty old crawler,' he said crossly; 'baby wants him deaded,' but Valerie objected to this.

'Mr. Worm,' she said gravely, 'was a respectable old gentleman in his way, though he was not exactly handsome; but if he chose to attend the funeral baby had no right to object,' and then Valerie turned the subject by pointing out various interesting mourners: a lady-bird, and a beetle, and a daddy-long-legs, and a great brown bee at that moment drowning his sorrow in the heart of a white lily; and Ronald had laughed with glee. 'Baby will have another burying to-morrow,' he observed, as he went cheerfully indoors for his noon-day nap. Oh, how Valerie had remembered this little scene. At luncheon she told Palmer that she could

not see any visitors, and directly afterwards she shut herself up in her husband's study. A volume of the Canon's sermons was passing through the press, and Valerie had undertaken to revise the proofs.

The Dean had offered to assist her, but when she had refused he had not pressed the point. 'The work will be good for her,' he said to his wife, 'and she has often helped her husband'; and indeed it was comforting to Valerie to feel that there was something she could do for him. *Light at Eventide*, that was the title he had chosen, and, as Valerie corrected the proof-sheets she thought how the light had reached him now. With tea-time came Ronald, very tired and hungry, and pleased with his day's excursion. Every one had been kind and made much of him, and Mr. Musgrave had given him a tip. 'Mrs. Musgrave sent you a long message, mother,' he went on; 'but I am afraid I have forgotten half. I don't know how it is, but I always do forget messages,' continued Ronald, as he helped himself to marmalade.

'I suppose I am to go back to Carfax on Monday,' he observed presently. 'Harry was asking me.' Then a sudden pain shot through Valerie's temples.

'Yes, I believe so,' she said rather faintly; but she was thankful that he did not pursue the subject. No idea that this would probably be his last term had entered Ronald's head. Oh, how willingly she would have lived on a dry crust, she thought, if she could only have ensured him a good education. Ronald was so clever; even the Dean said so. And then, as she remembered some words that had fallen from his lips the previous night, she got up quickly from the table. 'No, we have no right to take it from him,' she said to herself. 'I know I am proud, Alban always said so;

but somehow it would spoil everything.' But here a prodigious yawn from Ronald attracted her attention.

'Do you know, mother,' he said in an apologetic voice, 'that my ride has made me so sleepy that I I think I must go to bed.' Then Valerie, who always read with him for a few moments, rose at once, and they went upstairs together.

'I think you are so wise, darling,' she said as she kissed him and extinguished his candle. 'It is no good sitting up when one is half asleep.'

'No,' returned Ronald drowsily, and then a sudden thought crossed his mind. 'Mother, if Pansy comes, you are to wake me, remember that,' but Valerie's vague answer implied little.

What a long day it had been, and yet Valerie had no wish for repose. How was she to sleep with the thought of the future pressing so upon her? There was so much to decide and plan. The evening was mild, and the window was still open, and the sweet honeyed perfume of nicotiana stole into the room. As usual, Palmer had lighted the lamps, and his mistress had extinguished all but one; but the soft radiance hardly penetrated to the recess where Valerie sat among the shadows, looking out on the dark sky-line and one twinkling star in the distance.

Perhaps the dusky silence lulled Valerie to momentary repose, for the sound of the opening door did not rouse her. The next moment a small childish figure in grey stood in the centre of the room, glancing round her in troubled fashion. 'Marmee, where are you? Marmee!' exclaimed a piteous voice broken by a sob. Then Valerie came forward with a quick exclamation.

'Oh, Pansy, how you startled me!' and indeed Valerie's lips were quite white with that sudden sur-

prise. 'My dear child, my poor tired child, how have you come?' Then, as she took the woebegone little creature in her arms, Pansy hid her face on her shoulder and clung to her in a perfect passion of tears.

'Oh, my dear old Dad, my dear old Dad,' she sobbed; but as Valerie's arms closed round her with motherly tenderness, the words of comfort she was longing to speak seemed to freeze upon her lips.

CHAPTER VI

PANSY

'A man cannot speak but he judges himself. With his will, or against his will, he draws his portrait to the eye of his companions by every word. Every opinion reacts on him who utters it.'—EMERSON.

VALERIE could have found it in her heart to envy Pansy; if only she could have shed tears too! A sort of mental asphyxia oppressed her. She felt as though she were in a nightmare. There were words she longed to speak, and yet she remained absolutely voiceless; but she little knew that this strange passivity and absence of emotion was far better for Pansy than any amount of spoken sympathy. The poor child had reached the limits of her endurance. She was worn out in body and mind. For nights she had only slept by snatches, to the accompaniment of throbbing, rushing engines; and as she had sat dazed and numb with misery, looking out at the flying landscape, her one comforting thought had been that each hour she was nearer home.

This was what she wanted—to feel Valerie's kind arms round her, and to hide her face, and cry like a tired-out child. It was only when her sobs grew louder, and threatened to become hysterical, that Valerie summoned all her resolution.

'Hush, Pansy,' she said at last very firmly, 'you will wake Ronald. My poor child, what is the use of going on like this? it will only make you ill. You must come upstairs with me at once, and I will help you to bed.' Then, as she put her arm round the girl's waist, Pansy made no resistance.

Palmer was in the hall as they passed through it. His face was full of concern.

'There has no luggage come with Miss Pansy, ma'am,' he said in a perturbed voice, and then Pansy gave a shrill little laugh that startled them both.

'No, I left it behind at Victoria. There was no time to get it through, and I could not lose the train. They will send it on all right.' And then Pansy shivered suddenly, as though she were cold.

'Send Hannah to me, Palmer,' observed his mistress in a whisper; and then, as she assisted the weary girl to undress, she thought how like Pansy it was to free herself from any obstacles that impeded her. How careless of results, if she could only achieve her purpose.

When Pansy's weary head was at last laid on the pillow, and she had taken the warm comforting soup that Valerie had ordered, she opened her heavy eyes and looked at her step-mother. Valerie quite understood the meaning of her glance.

'Not to-night, dear,' she said very gently; 'you must sleep first. I am going to sit beside you for a little, and then you will not feel lonely.' But she had not long to watch. Pansy soon sank into the deep sleep of exhaustion, and for some hours at least she forgot her troubles.

She was still sleeping heavily when Valerie went down to breakfast the next morning. She found

Ronald much excited at hearing of his sister's arrival, and rather disposed to be injured on his own account.

'I told you to wake me, mother,' he said very reproachfully; but Valerie only smiled in his face.

'Mothers don't always do as they are told, Ron,' she returned quietly. And then Ronald grew rather red, and went on with his breakfast. Valerie never lectured, and seldom found fault with her boy, but her quiet speeches sometimes made Ronald tingle to his fingers' ends. 'Mother has a way with her,' he would say to Pansy, 'that seems to take the starch out of a fellow, and make him feel as though he has acted like a cad. She does not say much; but when she looks in a certain way one feels inclined to wriggle like a worm'; and Pansy had averred the truth of this singular description. She would ask him sometimes if he 'had the wriggles,' much to Valerie's mystification, and not even a furtive kick under the table would bring Pansy to reason, and make her behave herself.

So Ronald ate his breakfast, and listened quite meekly to his mother's account. The lost luggage had arrived; but Pansy still slept on until long past mid-day, as though nature was taking her revenge for nights of broken rest.

When she woke at last, Valerie was not with her. She had been obliged to go out on business with Ronald, and to leave her in Hannah's care. When they returned, early in the afternoon, Pansy was still in bed.

'Miss Pansy has been asking for you more than once, ma'am,' observed Hannah. 'She has made a good breakfast, and I have put her comfortable; but she is so giddy when she tries to get up that I persuaded her to lie still.'

'That was very sensible of you, Hannah,' returned Valerie in an approving tone. 'Come, Ron, we may as well go in together, but you need not stay long if Pansy seems tired'; and Ronald, who was very fond of his sister, needed no further persuasion.

Pansy was lying high up on her pillows, looking out at the tranquil garden. The window was open, and the sweet breath of roses and jasmine seemed to pervade the room. The little pale face and swollen eyelids made Ronald feel suddenly choky. When Pansy held out her hand to him with a sad smile, he kissed her, and then slipped behind his mother. He had never seen his bright young sister look like this before.

When strangers first saw Pansy Thurston they always passed her over as a mere child. 'A pale, insignificant little girl, just out of the schoolroom,' they would say. And even those who knew her, and the date of her birthday, would remark, almost apologetically, that it was strange that Canon Thurston's daughter should resemble him so little. 'Pansy takes after her mother,' Mrs. Walcott would say to her husband. 'Lady Emma was not really good-looking, but she had a pleasant comeliness of her own, and though Pansy is not pretty, she is very engaging.' And, indeed, it was allowed by most of her friends that, in spite of her short stature, and thinness, and the absence of colouring, Pansy was rather a fascinating little person.

She was certainly not without her good points. Her hair was abundant and very beautiful, and she dressed it in a picturesque fashion that exactly suited her. It was the colour of a ripe chestnut, and in certain lights it had a warm reddish shade. Her eyes too were very blue and bright, and it was their childish brilliance that had made her father call her 'little Eyebright.' 'I never

saw any eyes so blue as hers,' he had remarked once to Valerie; 'it is the real sapphire blue, only you seldom see it so bright.' Canon Thurston had plenty of pet names for her. He was a man who had delighted in expressions of affection, and Pansy certainly lent herself to these endearing diminutives, for they all suited her. She was his little Sweetheart, his Heartsease, his Blue-eyed Maid, even his Veronica. And Pansy had loved her names, but most of all she loved 'little Eyebright.' 'Do you know why I like it so?' she said once to Valerie. 'I looked it up in the dictionary one day, and it said that it was a plant of the genus Euphrasia, formerly much used as a remedy for diseases of the eye, and I thought that splendid'; and at that moment Pansy's eyes certainly shone like sapphires. She lay looking at her step-mother and Ronald with languid affection. Her passion had spent itself, and the fountain of her tears had dried up, but she felt still sick and giddy.

'Does your head ache, Pansy? You look pretty bad,' observed Ronald in a sympathising tone.

'Oh yes, it aches, but don't look so bothered, Ron, I shall be better soon. Look here, dear, Marmee is going to stay and talk to me—about everything, you know, but it is no good you staying too'; and then Ronald, with an air of relief, took his departure. He even whistled under his breath as he went downstairs. He was not as selfish as most boys, but at his age the youthful mind has a frank terror of emotion. 'They will talk, and then they will cry and hold each other's hands,' he said to himself as he went in search of Ladybird. 'My word, Pansy can cry, and no mistake'; and then Ronald plunged his hands in his pockets and kicked a pebble before him in rather a disconsolate fashion. Pansy's swollen eye-

lids and sad pathetic looks had made him desperately uncomfortable.

Valerie knew well what lay before her, but she had nerved herself for the task; and Pansy listened to her very quietly—only once, when she described the little scene when the sick man had imagined that Pansy was beside him, the girl had been overcome with emotion. 'Oh Dad, poor Dad,' she sobbed; 'but it was the first time I ever failed you, the first and the only time.'

'Dear Pansy, it was no fault of yours, and it made him happy to think you were there listening to him.'

'Yes, I know; please go on'; and Pansy closed her eyes and composed herself again to listen.

After all, it was a bald little account, Valerie told herself, very dry and meagre, but she had done her best. When the brief story had come to an end, her throat felt parched and weak. 'Dear child, I think I have told you all.' Then under the heavy lids there was a sudden blue flash, but the next minute Pansy looked away.

'If there were anything more that I could tell you,' went on Valerie, but her voice sounded dull and hesitating. Then Pansy, who had closed her eyes a little wearily, opened them again.

'No, no; I will not be selfish. You have done your best, Marmee; you always do'; and then some subtle understanding and tenderness made her take Valerie's hand and kiss it. It was cold as ice when the girl's warm lips touched it.

'Poor, dear Marmee,' she murmured; 'was there no one to take care of you?' Then a faint colour came to the widow's wan face.

'You know I am quite strong, Pansy, and that nothing ever ails me. There was no need that any one

should trouble themselves about me. I had Ronald, and then Mrs. Walcott was so good to me.'

'Ah, she is always goodness itself, and so is the Dean; but, Marmee, when I saw your face this morning I was almost frightened.'

'My dear Pansy!'

'Oh, but I was; you looked as though you had been left out too long in the cold, and had been almost frozen, like the poor robin Palmer brought in last winter.'

'But the robin revived'; and Valerie tried to smile.

'Yes, because Palmer held it in his big, warm hands; but it was nothing but a draggled heap of feathers when he first brought it in, and then when it was fed and warmed it actually began to chirp.'

Valerie was silent, but she well understood Pansy's little parable. Pansy was a picturesque talker even in her most genuine moments; she was wonderfully dramatic: she liked strong situations and startling paradoxes, and was rather pleased than otherwise when she shocked other people's sense of propriety.

The 'little pale girl,' as Mrs. Hammond called her, was remarkably keen-witted and clear-sighted. She had a knack of looking round corners and peeping behind the scenes. 'The looker-on sees most of the game,' Pansy would remark; for at times she bristled with wise sayings, like a miniature book of proverbial philosophy. 'I am in my scrappy Martin Tupperish mood,' she would say. But one day Ronald brought out quite a brilliant definition of his sister's conversational powers.

'You are like the Black Prince, Pansy,' he observed one day. Black Prince was the big, black Persian cat, much beloved by Pansy. 'Don't you know, when

he sits by the fire and you stroke him, how the sparks seem to fly out of his coat.'

'Good gracious, Ronald! aren't you getting a little involved?'

'Not a bit of it,' returned Ronald stoutly; 'when you are in a jolly mood, sleek and warm and comfortable, like the Black Prince, you say no end of clever things; it is just ripping to hear you—electric, that's the word, isn't it, mother?' and Ronald looked immensely proud of himself.

Valerie went away when Pansy had finished her little speech. There were times when she feared the girl's scrutinising glances. Dearly as they loved each other, and truly as Pansy honoured and admired her step-mother, there was no real confidence between the two; but the fault certainly did not lie on Pansy's side.

'How is one to talk through a wall?' Pansy had once said petulantly to her father; 'if one were only tall enough to look over it.' But Canon Thurston had only been amused at his daughter's indignation.

'You will soon be grown up, little girl,' he had said in his easy good-humoured way; but Pansy, who was in one of her obstinate moods, had scouted this idea very hotly.

'What was the use of growing up, if her step-mother went on building the wall higher and higher; to talk through the chinks was scarcely a satisfactory performance; to understand each other perfectly it was necessary to see each other's faces, but to prowl behind walls was more in the Black Prince's line.'

Later in the evening Mrs. Walcott called, but Valerie would not hear of her going up to Pansy.

'There must be no more talk until she has had

another night's rest,' she said firmly, and Mrs. Walcott had fully acquiesced in this.

'Do you not think it would be well for her to see Dr. Franklin?' she asked, but Valerie shook her head.

'Oh no; there is no need for that.' Pansy has had a shock, and her nerves have suffered, but she only wants rest and quiet. I do not fear for her; she will soon recover herself. She is young, and has wonderful recuperative powers.'

'But you have had some talk with her?' questioned her friend.

'Oh yes; there was so much that she wished to hear. She has been very dear and sweet, and I love to have her with me, but we must leave all business until she is rested.'

'Of course you must, and there is no hurry for a day or two; but, my dear Valerie, you are looking terribly pale. It is a lovely evening, shall we go into the garden? The Dean is coming to fetch me by and by; there is a little matter of business about which he has to speak to you, but he will not be here for half-an-hour,'—then Valerie willingly consented to this.

Their voices reached Pansy as she lay on her pillows, aching with weariness from head to foot, with strange noises in her ears and hot throbs of pain beating in her temples. She could hear Mrs. Walcott's deep, melodious voice, and Valerie's clear, sweet tones answering it. The two voices seemed to flow on in rhythmic unison,—with the warm evening lights, with the chirping of birds, with the fragrance of night-blowing flowers. Sweet scents and pleasant sounds seemed to blend with the eventide. Presently the bird notes died off into silence: only the human duet went

on—now crescendo, now diminuendo; rising; falling, but always measured and rhythmical.

'I wish I had a lovely voice like Marmee's,' thought the girl wistfully; and then she wondered to herself drowsily if Mrs. Walcott was talking through the chinks, or if she were tall enough to look over the wall.

Then she fell asleep, and had a singular dream. She thought she was in the crowded market-place of a great city, full of strange buildings that seemed to lift to heaven; her step-mother was beside her, and they were both very forlorn and miserable.

'Can we get out?' she heard herself saying. 'I do not like this place; there is no light and no air, only prison walls'; but her step-mother shook her head.

'I have forgotten the password,' she said, and there was despair in her voice. 'There is life and death depending on it, but it has gone from me utterly'; and Valerie wrung her hands.

The next moment a man detached himself from the throng and came towards them. Pansy could not see his face, for the shades of night were enveloping the city, but he held out his hand to Valerie. 'I have it,' he said; 'follow me. There is no death to a true heart that keeps its child's faith to the last'; and then the city walls seemed to recede, and there was the starry heavens above them, and with a start Pansy woke, to hear the Dean's voice underneath her window.

'The dews are heavy,' she heard him say; 'it is too late for you and Valerie to be out. Come in, like sensible women, and let me talk to you'; and then Pansy heard no more.

CHAPTER VII

'I WILL BE LIKE RUTH'

'How long? "Nay, that I cannot tell
In wind and rain and frost,"
It may be so; and it is well
That you should count the cost.

'Pilgrims from near and from distant land
Will step on you lying there,
But a wayfaring man with wounded hands
Will carry you up the stair.'

GEORGE MACDONALD.

AFTER all, Dr. Franklin was summoned.

That very evening Pansy had alarmed them. On trying to rise from her bed she had fainted, and Valerie, who was never stoical where other people's health was concerned, had sent Ronald at once for the doctor; but when he came he soon satisfied her that there was not much amiss. Dr. Franklin was an old and trusted friend of the family. He had brought Pansy into the world, and had attended Lady Emma in her long and tedious illness. He knew all their constitutions; and even Canon Thurston, who had had a nervous horror of illness, and was rather given to the idea that 'in the number of counsellors there was wisdom,' wanted no one but his faithful old friend near him when he lay dying.

Dr. Franklin grasped the situation at once, but he did not waste words; he patted the girl's hand kindly, and told her to be a good child and lie still, and she would soon be better, and then he followed Valerie downstairs.

'It is as clear as print, Mrs. Thurston,' he said in his curt, decided way, 'Miss Pansy has been behaving after the usual fashion of the young Englishwoman abroad, climbing mountains and taking it out of herself. She was tired out and a little run down before the shock came—why, my dear lady, the strongest constitution in the world must have suffered; by her own account Miss Pansy seems scarcely to have slept or eaten for days.'

'She never fainted before, Dr. Franklin.'

'No, I daresay not, and there is no reason why she should ever faint again; in spite of her pale complexion, she is stronger than most girls of her age.

'Look here, Mrs. Thurston—keep her in bed for a couple of days and feed her up well; no visitors, mind, no agitating talk; she can spend her time in making up arrears of sleep, and she will soon be all right again'; but as Dr. Franklin left the house, his rugged, strongly-marked face looked unusually grave. 'There is not much the matter with the girl,' he said to himself, 'she is young and nature will do the rest; it is Mrs. Thurston who looks ill,' and the doctor, who was a kind-hearted man, grunted audibly. He and Mr. Lloyd were alike in their opinion of Mrs. Thurston. With Dr. Franklin she had always been a prime favourite; 'a woman who can hold her tongue as well as do her duty is a *rara avis*,' he would say, for he was an old bachelor and something of a cynic too.

Dr. Franklin's keen eyes read signs of mental anguish in Valerie's sad face; she had grown thinner

and paler during the last fortnight, and the skin seemed too tightly strained over the forehead ; there were even faint hollows near the temples.

'If this goes on I must speak to her,' thought the doctor ; 'when one has work to do there is no use in breaking down' ; but he need not have disquieted himself, Valerie had no intention of breaking down. Nursing and petting Pansy was the best occupation for her just then, and the quiet hours spent in Pansy's room, while the girl slept, seemed to rest her more than anything.

Dr. Franklin looked in more than once and nodded approval. 'You have a sensible nurse, Miss Pansy,' he observed, 'and one who knows how to carry out orders' ; but Pansy, who was tired of dozing and holding her tongue, grumbled a little.

'I don't like the silent system,' she said rather crossly ; 'I am going downstairs to-morrow, Dr. Franklin, and I mean to talk hard.'

'Well—well, moderation in all things,' he returned leniently, and Pansy knew she had got her marching orders.

Pansy carried out her programme triumphantly the next day ; it was a lovely afternoon, and Valerie had had the wicker-chair placed in the verandah, the red cushions looked very inviting to Pansy.

'That is a good idea,' she observed approvingly, but she panted a little with weakness. 'Marmee, I hope you told Palmer to let us have tea out here.'

'Yes, dear, and I also told him not to admit any visitors ; I was so afraid Mrs. Hammond would call, she promised to come again soon' ; then, at the mention of Mrs. Hammond, Pansy made a naughty little face.

'Oh no, we do not want her, Marmee, dear ; I want

no one but you this afternoon,' and she rubbed her cheek in kittenish fashion against Valerie's black gown.

Pansy always called her step-mother 'Marmee'; it was an invention of her own, and dated from her father's wedding-day.

She had followed her new step-mother upstairs when Valerie changed her bridal finery for her travelling dress, and had watched her with eyes of childish awe, not unmixed with wonder.

'You are not such a grand lady now,' she remarked with her usual frankness; 'you are not so pretty, but you look comfortabler.' Then the blue eyes grew very grave—'Dad said last night that I must call you mother, but I cried and said I would not; and then Dad told me that I was naughty, but I was not naughty, not the least little bit; how can any little girl have two mothers?—my mother was Lady Emma, you know,' and Pansy held up her head with the air of a young princess.

'Yes, dear child, I know—but you will be my little girl too, and we will love each other very dearly. Call me what you like, darling, any name will do,' and then the shadow passed from the child's face.

'Oh, may I!' she cried joyfully; 'then I will call you Marmee—it is such a nice name, and I have made it up myself.'

Then Valerie assured her with the utmost gravity that it was a lovely name, and Pansy clapped her hands, and then gave her a good hug—and from that instant her heart was won.

Pansy looked more like a child than ever in her black dress, as she nestled amongst her cushions. Valerie, who had brought out her knitting, was seated

opposite to her. There was a book on Pansy's lap, but she did not open it.

'How lovely it all looks,' she said, almost in a whisper, 'our dear old garden;—Marmee,' rather hurriedly, 'Mr. Lloyd was here this morning; did he say how soon we should have to leave it all?' Then at this question Valerie gave a quick sigh of relief—Pansy knew, yes, of course she knew, and there was no need to tell her.

'The sooner the better, that is what he said, Pansy; you see there are dilapidations, and the in-coming tenant—the new Canon—' but Pansy suddenly frowned.

'Oh, never mind all that, Marmee; I can only think of ourselves—of you and me and Ronald—what is to become of us? that is the question I have been wanting to ask ever since I came home. Don't you know how one longs to know, and yet one is afraid to put the question. When you came into the room I would say to myself, "Now I will ask her," but every time my courage failed—I knew by your face that you had no good news to tell me.'

'No, dear, and I fear I have none now. Pansy, are you sure you are strong enough to discuss this; would it not be wiser to wait for a day or two?' But Pansy would not hear of this; anything was better than brooding, she said; bogies and hobgoblins were not always so terrible when one faced them; if Valerie had no good news to give her she must endure to hear the bad. She had been a coward long enough, and now she was ready for any amount of hobgoblins. Nevertheless it needed all her self-command and force of will to enable her to listen patiently, and with outward calmness, to Valerie's account.

'Nothing had prepared her for this,' she told herself with incredulous pain, but when her step-mother mentioned Roadside she could not repress a shudder.

'Oh, Marmee, not that miserable, poky little house!' she exclaimed with strong indignation; 'no one has a right to tell you to do such things. I shall hate Mr. Lloyd for this.'

'Dear child, Mr. Lloyd had nothing to do with it, it was my own proposal—but of course he approved, and so did the Dean'; then at the Dean's name Pansy ground her little white teeth together in anguish of spirit.

'It is not right—it is not fit for us to live in such a place,' went on Pansy angrily; 'you ought not to have proposed it, Marmee.'

'Dear child, how could I help myself?' returned Valerie quietly; 'did you not hear me say that Ronald and I will only have about a hundred and fifty a year; Roadside is our own, and it will not let—' but Pansy was too excited to let her finish.

'Let! of course not—who would care to live in those low, dark little rooms, looking out on that dusty road, and with that narrow, fusty little garden—and after this—this,' and Pansy's voice seemed to thrill with pain.

'Dear Pansy, do you think I do not feel it too?' returned Valerie, and there was a sad look in her eyes. All her life she had lived among beautiful things. Her father's vicarage had been ideal in its simple loveliness, and her husband had given her a home of which any woman would have been proud. In her secret heart she loathed the idea of Roadside quite as much as Pansy did, but not for an instant would she give way, though the girl tried to beguile her from her purpose.

'Listen to me, Marmee. We can surely think of some better plan. There is my money, you know. I shall throw it into the common stock—don't you remember what my dear old Dad said?' and here Pansy's voice was a little broken. Day and night those words which Valerie had repeated were in her ears—'Take care of Ron, do not let the boy suffer for my imprudence.' True, the words had been spoken to the empty air, but they had been meant for her, and her alone; and then a very sweet, wistful look came into Pansy's eyes.

'Dear Marmee, I am going to take care of you and Ron too. I feel as though Dad has left you to me.' But Valerie was too much moved to answer; for the first time her own eyes were a little dim.

'Marmee, dear, why do you not answer? Don't you know how I shall love to do it? I mean to be like Ruth to you—"where thou goest I will go" . . . don't you remember how it goes on?' But Valerie's sole reply was to clasp the girl in her arms.

'Will you go with me to Roadside, Pansy?' she asked presently, but her voice was not steady.

'Yes—there or anywhere else, but I will not promise to like it. Poor Ronald, how he will hate it.' Then at the mention of her boy Valerie's face grew troubled again.

'Dear, I want to consult you about Ronald. Do you think, if we are very careful, and spend very little, that we can keep him at Mr. Carfax's? The Dean spoke to me about it the other day. I think—yes, I am almost sure from his manner, that he wanted to help us with Ronald's education, but I would not let him go on. Is it wrong of me, Pansy? but I could not bring myself to accept it.'

'I don't think you wrong a bit,' and Pansy spoke in a very decided voice; 'it is for me to look after Ronald. Ah! I see what you mean now, Marmee. If we go to Roadside, and have only a scrub of a girl to do the work, and make our own dresses, and wear all our old clothes, we could easily keep Ron at Mr. Carfax's.'

'That is what I thought,' returned Valerie quietly; 'but have we any right to use your money—' then Pansy drew herself up with an offended air.

'Marmee, I call that horrid of you. How can you be such a mean, grudging old Naomi? I don't love you a bit when you talk like that. Isn't it your money and Ronald's? Hasn't Dad left him to me? "Take care of Ron"—do you suppose I shall ever forget that?'

'Dear Pansy, I think no one was ever so generous as you, and you have lifted a load off my mind. If my boy has the education of a gentleman he must thank his sister, not me.'

'It is no question of thanks,' returned Pansy pettishly. 'Do you suppose I have not got plenty of pride too? Why, I would rather slave and work my fingers to the bone than take Ron away from Carfax's,' and here Pansy stretched out a pair of plump white hands with a dramatic gesture, and as she did so there was the sudden glitter of diamonds. Then she interrupted herself with a little laugh, 'Why do people say that, I wonder?' she continued reflectively. 'It is not a nice idea, is it, Marmee? It makes me feel as though I were suddenly exposed to the Röntgen rays, and saw my poor skeleton little fingers without their comfortable padding,' and here Pansy regarded her finger-tips lovingly; but Valerie was not to be drawn into any extraneous argument of this sort.

'We must not exaggerate the difficulties, Pansy,' she said in her reasonable way. 'Mr. Lloyd says I may have all the furniture I want, and he quite hopes that when the rest is sold there may be a little money in hand. Roadside will look far better when it is furnished, and some of the rooms are to be repapered. We can only keep one servant, certainly—a young girl whom we can train ourselves—but with care and economy there will be no need to pinch.'

'Yes, I know,' returned Pansy, with a little gulp, as though she were swallowing something nauseous. 'We shall have meat once a day, and an egg for our tea, or perhaps cocoa and bread-and-butter for supper. No more late dinners and delicacies for breakfast, no pretty new dresses from London. Well, Marmee, we shall have to renounce the world, the flesh, and the devil, and no mistake,' and Pansy gave herself a little shake.

It was impossible not to smile.

'I hope I shall manage better than that,' observed Valerie, speaking for the first time with something like cheerfulness. 'I cannot promise you that we shall live luxuriously, but I think I can undertake that we shall be comfortable. You can have pretty dresses still, Pansy,' but Pansy shook her head incredulously. 'Well, you shall see. And, dear, another idea has occurred to me. We might have a child to live with us. That would be a real help. Mrs. Walcott has a great many Indian friends. I will speak to her at once'; and as Pansy graciously approved of this idea, and even offered to take the little stranger into her room, Valerie felt in better heart about the future.

They broke off the conversation at this point, as Palmer appeared with the tea-tray, and they did not

resume it again that evening. Pansy was tired, and not a little depressed; a heavy weight of care and responsibility seemed suddenly shifted to her young shoulders—the old happy life, so safe and sheltered, was ended, and the future stretched before her, barren and uninviting.

Pansy's book was open on her lap, but she was only pretending to read. Once when she looked up she saw Valerie's eyes fixed on her.

'What is it, Marmee?' she asked listlessly. 'I am too tired to talk any more to-night.'

'Yes, dear, I know, and it is I who have tired you,' returned Valerie remorsefully; 'but, Pansy, have you forgotten—I mean haven't we both forgotten—Gurth Fordham?' Then Pansy frowned.

'As though one could remember him,' she said quite crossly. 'Gurth has nothing—nothing to do with this,' and then Pansy yawned, and got up from her chair. 'I think I will go upstairs now, Marmee,' she said wearily; 'will you bid Ronald good-night for me?' Then, as Valerie looked at her anxiously, the girl lingered beside her a moment.

'We have had a nice talk, haven't we, Marmee, and you are ever so much happier now,' and then her arm went coaxingly round Valerie's neck. 'Say "good-night, Ruth"; that is my new name, you know, and you must say it this once to please me.'

'Good-night, my dear, faithful little Ruth, and God bless you, darling, for your goodness to me and mine.'

'Good gracious, Naomi, how solemn you are! but all the same it sounds rather nice; that is our Mizpah, isn't it, Marmee—our pillar of testimony,—there, let me go,' for Valerie was holding her fast; but as Pansy turned away, her eyes were full of tears. When she reached

her room she wept long and bitterly. 'Oh Dad,' she whispered, 'why did you do it—isn't life difficult enough without that? I was so young, and I did not know; I was only a foolish child; was it my fault, or yours, or his?' and then the pitiful young voice repeated, 'my fault, or yours, or his?'

CHAPTER VIII

ROADSIDE

'Calamity is man's true touchstone'—BEAUMONT AND FLETCHER.

'And yet the compensations of calamity are made apparent to the understanding also, after long intervals of time; a fever, a mutilation, a cruel disappointment, a loss of wealth, a loss of friends, seems at the moment unpaid loss and unpayable. But the sure years reveal the deep remedial force that underlies all facts.'—EMERSON.

IT was some days before Pansy was strong enough to go to Roadside, but Valerie had paid it a surreptitious visit, and had spent a bitter hour there, trying to accustom herself to its dulness and somewhat aggressive ugliness. Ronald had gone back to Mr. Carfax, but his Sunday afternoons and evenings would be spent as usual with his mother. The day before he left home, as Valerie was helping him pack his play-box, she took advantage of a lull in the preparations to tell him about Roadside, but, to her surprise, there was no exclamation of astonishment; Ronald had a pair of skates in his hands, and he went on polishing them carefully against his coat sleeve.

'Did you understand me, Ron?' she observed in her sad, quiet voice. 'We shall be very poor, and Roadside is quite a small house.'

'Of course I know it,' returned Ronald violently, as

though he were suddenly stung into speech. 'It's a beastly sort of place. I wonder what the other fellows will say when they know we live in a poky little hole like that,' and Ronald looked red and excited.

'What does it matter what they say,' returned Valerie gravely; 'being poor is no disgrace, Ron. It is hard to bear, and we shall need all our courage; but, my dear boy, do not forget that the hardest part will fall on our shoulders,' and then very quietly and with infinite tenderness she explained to the astonished boy that it was only Pansy's generosity and unselfishness that enabled her to keep him at Mr. Carfax's and to give him the education of a gentleman.

'You have been our first and chief thought,' went on Valerie; but there was a tinge of reproach in her soft voice that made Ronald wince; 'but you must work hard, and prove yourself worthy of our sacrifice,' and then, as she looked at him pleadingly, Ronald's better spirit was aroused.

'Yes, I see, mother,' he returned hastily, giving her one of his bear's hugs, 'and I will work hard—you just see if I don't. Pansy is no end of a trump, and I mean to tell her so; but when I am a man I will pay it all back,' and then muttering something about a book he had forgotten, Ronald rushed off, and left his mother to finish the packing alone.

Valerie's heart was sore with pity for her boy. Ronald had inherited her proud, sensitive nature; he was rather thin-skinned, and felt things more keenly than most boys of his age, and he was quick-tempered and prone to take offence.

Canon Thurston's son had hitherto held a good position among his schoolfellows; the thought that his mother and sister would be living in a shabby little

house like Roadside was galling to the lad's pride, and then there was the loss of his beloved pony; so no wonder Ronald felt as though his cup of woe were filled to the brim.

Nothing had been decided about Ladybird. Valerie was waiting to hear from Mr. Lloyd if he had found a purchaser. But as they sat at breakfast the next morning she put a question or two to Ronald.

'You are in Mr. Nugent's class, are you not, Ron?' and Ronald, who was helping himself to jam, nodded.

'I joined last half,' he observed presently. 'It is awful fun, mother. I like natural science ever so much better than Greek and Latin, and old Nugent is a capital fellow.'

'Is he, Ron?'

'Of course he is, all our fellows say so. But he is different from the other masters somehow, grander and more stand-offish; but no one seems to think the worse of him for that. You know what they say, mother, that he has plenty of money, and does not need to teach, really, but that he does it out of pure love of his work.'

'Do you think that is true, Ronald?'

'Well, I don't know, but he gives one that idea, rather, and then the Old House is grander than any of the other masters' houses, and he has it all to himself too.'

'Why, Ronald, Mrs. Hamerton told me that Mr. Nugent had his mother-in-law to live with him.'

'Oh, Madame! Yes, of course she is there, and his little girl too, but I was not thinking of them. Don't you remember, mother, that I was invited to one of the Saturday breakfasts at the Old House last half? Sefton took me, and we had a grand time. Madame

Mercier poured out the coffee—don't you recollect I told you she was just like a little white cat, and that she was muffled up in lace and muslin, and no end of frills? Sefton said she reminded him of the fairy god-mother in *Cinderella*, but I don't think he quite hit it off there; she is more like the white cat, you know.'

'Mrs. Hamerton says that Madame Mercier is quite *la grande dame*,' returned his mother, 'and that she has very fine manners. She was excessively struck with her'; but Ronald only shrugged his shoulders at this.

'Sefton and I were struck with her too,' he returned dryly. 'We never saw any one so droll-looking before. Just imagine, mother, a little old lady in frills and capes of muslin and lace, with a hard, brown little face and bright eyes, and piles of fluffy white hair, and then her claw-like hands all twinkling with coloured stones'; and here Ronald paused, as though quite exhausted by his vivid powers of description, and applied himself to his breakfast.

Valerie had listened much amused; the new Science Master at Wycombe School had been much canvassed in the place, and though not addicted to gossip, both she and Mrs. Walcott had taken a good deal of interest in the singular *ménage* at the Old House. Mr. Nugent was quite a stranger in the place, and all that was known of him was that he was a widower and had one little girl, and that his mother-in-law lived with him and kept his house. By and by it leaked out that she was really an Englishwoman, but that her husband had been a Frenchman, and that she had lived all her married life in Paris. She was a widow in needy circumstances when she came to nurse her daughter in her last illness, but no one knew why Mr. Nugent

suffered her to live there. Report said that she was by no means judicious or tender to her little granddaughter, and that, save for her father's society, the child led a very solitary life. Valerie had met her more than once in the close, walking primly beside her *bonne*—a heavy-faced Belgian. She was not an attractive-looking child; she was puny and pale, with colourless fair hair, and dark singularly-bright eyes, that looked out of proportion to the rest of her features, and which glanced at strangers in a frightened sort of way. Once when Valerie had come across them on the Cathedral green she stopped to accost them. The *bonne*, a phlegmatic-looking person, was knitting a pair of huge blue stockings, and the little girl was watching some children playing under the elms.

Valerie's motherly instinct had been aroused. 'Why do you not play too, little one?' she had said kindly; but the child only coloured up and looked at her nurse in an alarmed way.

'Madame objects to Mademoiselle amusing herself on the green,' returned the girl stolidly, as she stuck her needles into her ball of yarn. 'Mademoiselle does the skip and the ball-throwing in her own garden—*Tenez*, Mademoiselle, it is time that we return.' Then the little girl rose obediently.

'Will you not tell me your name?' asked Valerie, holding out her hand; and no child could have resisted the low, sweet voice.

'Philippa Mary Nugent,' she returned shyly; 'and I live with father and grannie at the Old House'; but her artless confidence was interrupted by a rough pull from the *bonne*.

'Madame does not wish for Mademoiselle to talk to strangers; thou art *méchante*, Mademoiselle Philippa.'

'Poor little soul,' Valerie had said to herself as she followed them; 'that *bonne* looks a rough, ill-tempered girl. Why can she not have a bright young English nurse to play with her and amuse her?' and she had poured out her indignation to Mrs. Walcott.

She had never encountered the little girl since that day, but the thought that the lonely child might be gladdened by the possession of the beloved Ladybird went some way to reconcile Valerie to her boy's loss—'at least he will see her sometimes,' she said to herself; but happily for Ronald's peace of mind he knew nothing of these negotiations on foot. Ladybird was in her comfortable loose box when he went to bid her good-bye and to carry her his offering of carrots and sugar, but she quite understood that he was leaving her, and rubbed her pretty head against his jacket and whinnied softly and sadly to him, and Ronald put his arms round her neck and made much of her.

Pansy had decided on going to Roadside that afternoon; the workmen were going in the next day, and there was no time to be lost, so after luncheon she and Valerie walked down together.

Roadside was certainly not an inviting-looking abode for any one possessing a taste for the picturesque. It justified its name most fully, for the front door opened directly on the street—in fact, as Pansy expressed it, 'two steps landed you from the road into the sitting-room,' and there was not much exaggeration in this statement. The little square hall was badly lighted by a circular window of greenish glass, which, in Pansy's opinion, reminded her of a prison. The two sitting-rooms were in front, and looked full on the road, so that substantial blinds would be necessary. 'Even a mangy shrub would be a relief,' observed Pansy in a

resentful tone. 'Just think, Marmee—any Jack, Tom, or Harry could flatten their noses against our drawing-room window, and we could not prevent them.'

'I don't think we will call it a drawing-room, dear,' returned Valerie sensibly; 'and even dining-room seems too grand a name for this homely little parlour.'

'I quite agree with you,' remarked Pansy, looking round her with strong disapproval; 'if I were asked to describe this apartment I should call it a cross between a large square box and a Chinese junk. Look at that horrible milk-and-waterish willow-pattern sort of paper—a dingy blue,—why, the mustard-coloured paper in the other room is preferable.' But here Valerie interposed with a comforting word—Pansy should choose all the new papers; but even this promise failed to bring a smile to Pansy's lips.

'I tell you what, Marmee,' she burst out at last,—'I shall call these rooms Scylla and Charybdis—nothing else suits them. We shall take our frugal repasts in Charybdis, and I feel convinced that my appetite will only be equal to an egg,' and then with a tragical air she walked into the other room.

'This is not quite so bad, Pansy dear,' observed Valerie with forced cheerfulness; but even in Scylla, she privately felt, there was room for improvement. It was a long, narrow room with cross lights, with a glass door opening on the garden. The garden itself was a scene of pitiable neglect and desolation, as Pansy observed afterwards; it resembled a country lane that had not been trodden by the foot of man since the beginning of the Victorian era; it was a mere jungle of overgrown box and laurels, with a long slip of a lawn, which was one mass of docks and dandelions. Pansy looked at it with an air of disgust, and laughed

hysterically as she remembered the rose and pear-tree walks and smooth green lawns of their beloved garden; but Valerie, who was determined to make the best of things, walked out on the grassy path with the air of a Cæsar who knows he has new worlds to conquer.

'I shall send a man in to-morrow,' she said when she returned from her tour of inspection, 'and I shall ask Giles to superintend the work.' Giles was their gardener, and an old and valued servant. 'It is shockingly neglected, Pansy, but when the shrubs are thinned, and the lawn mown, and the paths cleaned and weeded, it will look a different sort of place; and there is a lovely Virginian creeper over all the back of the house, only it sadly wants training.' Pansy was too much depressed to return any answer to this. She followed Valerie silently into the dark little kitchen, with its one window thickly screened by the creeper. Then they went up the steep ladder-like stairs to inspect the sleeping-rooms. There were only four, and a large open loft, which would hold boxes and other household gear; but Valerie noticed at once that the passage was airy and well lighted, and that there was room for a substantial linen press.

The two front rooms were a tolerable size, the others much smaller, but they all had fireplaces. Indeed, the front rooms were not uncheerful, as they overlooked the road. One of them had an old brown window-seat. Valerie sat down for a moment, but Pansy was too dejected to follow her example.

'How do people live in such places?' she said in a voice of despair. Then Valerie, who was deep in thought, roused herself.

'Dear,' she said quietly, 'it is a hard bit of road for your tender little feet, but "time and the hour run

through the roughest day,"' and then she quoted softly a stanza that had often been on Pansy's lips in happier days—

> Stone walls do not a prison make
> Nor iron bars a cage;
> Minds innocent and quiet take
> That for a hermitage;
> If I have freedom in my love
> And in my soul am free,
> Angels alone that soar above
> Enjoy such liberty.

'Don't, Marmee,' in a choked voice, 'I am in no mood for copy-book wisdom, and even brave Richard Lovelace palls on me—to think that you and I, who love everything beautiful, have to live in this close, ugly little house. It is a nightmare. I want to scream myself awake.' And then Pansy's mood changed, and she gave herself a gentle little shake, and pranced on the bare floor, much as Ladybird did in a temper.

'Don't you recollect that bit out of "Beaumont and Fletcher"?' she said in a droll voice—

> 'The fit's upon me!
> Come quickly, gentle lady,
> The fit's upon me now.

Well, the foul fiend has got hold of me, Marmee, and you must exorcise him and set me free.'

'That is work that we must all do for ourselves,' returned Valerie mournfully. 'Dear child, do come and sit down beside me a moment, and let me try to comfort you.'

'But you want comfort yourself, you poor dear,' and Pansy stroked her step-mother's face very tenderly, but Valerie only smiled at her.

'Yes, dear, but I am thankful for my compensations. While I have you and Ronald I will not complain that my troubles are too heavy to bear; one may be peaceful and at rest even in Roadside.' But Pansy shook her head.

'I am not on your plane, Marmee,' she returned sorrowfully; 'I am a discontented, worldly-minded little girl, and I want my loaves and fishes and nice things. I am in a bad temper, and my head aches'; and then as she led the way downstairs she chanted again in a dismal little voice—

> The fit's upon me now!
> Come quickly, gently lady,
> The fit's upon me now;

and a few minutes afterwards they were walking quickly along the high-road in the direction of the close.

Late in the evening, when Pansy had retired to bed with a bad sick headache, Valerie went across to the Deanery. She knew that by that hour her friends would have finished dinner, and that she would probably find Mrs. Walcott alone in her pleasant sitting-room. Sometimes after coffee the Dean would retire to the library to write letters, and his wife would follow him later; and he had done so this evening.

Mrs. Walcott put down her book and welcomed her with evident pleasure. 'This is good of you, Valerie,' she said in the deep tones which always seemed to express so much more than her words. 'The Dean is busy just now, but we will join him presently. But why did you not bring Pansy?'

Then Valerie related the account of their visit to Roadside, and how Pansy's fit of spleen had resulted in a sick headache.

'She is not well yet,' went on Valerie in a pitying voice, 'and of course all this tries her dreadfully. She is so good. Nothing would induce her to separate herself from us. She will spend all her little income on us and take no credit to herself for her generosity. That is just like Pansy, she is the best lover and the most liberal giver in the world'; and again Valerie's eyes grew soft and misty as she remembered the girl's touching speech, 'I will be like Ruth to you.'

Mrs. Walcott looked profoundly interested. 'Pansy is a dear child,' she said affectionately, 'and we are all very fond of her; but there is one question I want to ask you, Valerie—Is that absurd engagement broken off?' Then a worried look came into Valerie's face.

'Don't you know Pansy better than that?' she returned almost reproachfully. 'With all her nonsense and flighty little ways she is as true as steel. When she has once given her word, nothing on earth would induce her to break her promise.'

'But, my dear Valerie,' in a tone of strong remonstrance, 'circumstances alter cases, and Pansy was a mere child when she accepted Mr. Fordham; and if you will pardon me for saying so, I always thought the poor dear Canon was to blame in that matter.'

'You are right,' in a low voice; 'and I can assure you that my husband bitterly repented the part he took in hurrying on the engagement; it was heavy on his mind towards the last. "Tell Pansy from me that it is her duty to throw over Gurth Fordham,"—he actually said that to me one night.'

'I hope you told her that, Valerie.'

'Oh yes, I told her, but I might as well have spoken to the winds of heaven. She had hardly patience to hear me out.'

'Dad should have told me so five years ago,' was all her answer, 'it is too late now, and no man shall ever tell me that I have spoilt his life,' and she refused to hear another word.

'And this hopeless engagement will go on?'

'Oh yes, it will go on, or the Deluge will come, who knows!'

'But she may like somebody better,' but Mrs. Walcott spoke dolorously.

'True, there is always that chance, but at present Pansy is heart-whole, she is not in love with Gurth Fordham — she never was in love with him — the subject merely bores her'; but at that moment the Dean entered, and to Valerie's relief the subject dropped.

CHAPTER IX

'MORE LIKE A NAVVY'

'O, what men do ! what men daily do, not knowing what they do.'

'Some of us will smart for it.'

Much Ado about Nothing.

THE story of Pansy's engagement was a sore subject with Valerie, and she could never speak of it with any degree of patience.

It had always been a matter of controversy between her and her husband, but repeated arguments and long, heated discussions had never shaken her belief that her husband's impulsiveness and fatal easiness of temperament had involved his young daughter in difficulties from which it would not be easy to extricate her. More than once she had told him that if Pansy's future happiness were blighted such misery must lie at her father's door, but he had only reproved her in his repressive way for her vehemence and exaggeration of speech. 'You may be sure that my child's happiness is very near to my heart, and that I shall always study her welfare,' he had concluded in a firm sort of tone that had allowed of no more discussion, and Valerie had retired, baffled and discouraged, to moralise sadly and

silently over her husband's strange infatuation and blindness.

It was poor consolation for her to know that on his deathbed he had come round to her opinion, and that the thought of Pansy's future disquieted him sorely; but there was little comfort to give him. 'Tell her that it is my wish that she break off this foolish engagement with Fordham,' he had said to Valerie, and she had bowed her head in answer.

Alas! what comfort could she give him? The message would be delivered faithfully, but she had little hope that Pansy would abide by it. 'I will tell her, dear,' she had said gently, as he looked at her with strained, anxious eyes. 'Try to put it out of your mind, Alban; our child's future is in God's hands'; but a low groan had answered her; the poor weak man had sown his pillow with thorns which robbed him of his rest.

The story of Pansy's engagement was as follows:— When Pansy was between sixteen and seventeen, Ronald, then a child of six, had whooping-cough severely; his health suffered, and he seemed so delicate that Dr. Franklin recommended that he should spend the greater part of the winter at St. Leonards. The sea air would benefit Mrs. Thurston, he went on, for she had knocked herself up in nursing the boy.

Valerie was unwilling to leave her home for so long a period, but her husband's opinion coincided with the doctor's—the boy was the first consideration, everything else must give way to that; he and Pansy would keep each other company, and he would run down and have a look at them whenever he could. Valerie was reasonable enough to be guided by her husband's wishes, but she was tired and depressed, and could

not shake off her nervous fancies. If she could only take Pansy with her, she thought; indeed she hinted at this rather timidly in her next conversation with her husband, but Canon Thurston had looked at her as though he thought she had suddenly taken leave of her senses.

'My dear Valerie, you cannot be serious,' he remonstrated; 'two or three months' idleness would surely be prejudicial to a girl of Pansy's age; it would be far better for her to work at her German and French and keep me company in the evening'; and Valerie felt she could not well contradict this.

Pansy's governess had been dismissed, and she attended French and German classes with Canon Grantham's daughters, and she also shared their music and singing lessons. Doris and Janet Grantham were nice intelligent girls, and Doris had become Pansy's chief friend. The plan had worked excellently, and, from the Canon's point of view, it was certainly a pity to break off her studies to accompany her step-mother, and Valerie felt it would be impossible to say more.

'Dad and I will take care of each other, and have a good time,' observed Pansy that last evening. 'You are not to bother your head about us, Marmee,' and Valerie strove to abide by her advice; and indeed for the first three or four weeks her whole attention and thoughts were occupied with her boy, whose condition was far from satisfactory. The Canon was a prolific letter-writer, and he and Pansy had always plenty of news to narrate. Presently they had a great deal to say about a stranger who had arrived at Wycombe and was staying with the precentor, Mr. Donaldson. He was a wealthy Australian who was paying his first visit to the old country, and, on Mr. Donaldson's recom-

mendation, he had been very well received in the close.

'They are asking him to dinner at the Deanery and at the Granthams, and Hammond and I agree we must follow suit,' wrote the Canon in his somewhat florid handwriting. 'Donaldson swears by him; they are as thick as thieves, but he seems a nice fellow. Rather a rough diamond perhaps, a bit rugged and unpolished, but as straightforward and honest as the day; simple too, for a child could take him in,' and so on, for the Canon delighted in description and loved to draw a portrait minutely.

Pansy wrote a postscript to her father's letter: 'Every one has gone mad over the Australian gold-miner; they say that he is a millionaire and as rich as Crœsus, and that he perfectly wallows in gold. Dad says he wishes some would roll his way. Doris and I were wild to see him, but I am afraid we were both rather disappointed; he doesn't look a bit rich—more like a navvy than a millionaire, with such big, clumsy hands and feet, and a rough, reddish moustache that wants trimming. Dad says I am writing nonsense and giving you false impressions. Be quiet, Dad, I will have my say, for it is—

> 'Gold! and gold! and gold without end!
> He had gold to lay by, and gold to spend,
> Gold to give, and gold to lend,
> And reversions of gold in future.

'You will excuse this little burst of poetry, Marmee dear, but Dad and I are reading aloud Hood's Golden Legend, "Miss Kilmansegg and her Precious Leg." For, as Shakespeare remarks, "What is here? Gold! yellow, glittering, and precious gold!"'

Valerie found plenty of amusement in these letters. When the threatened dinner took place she had a full description of the interesting function.

'I would not have a regular dinner-party in your absence, my dear,' wrote the Canon, 'so I just asked the Hammonds and Donaldson, and we were a snug number. Pansy made a charming little hostess and was quite at her ease, chatting away with Fordham; he is a nice friendly sort of a chap, no nonsense about him, and I could see he was immensely struck with "little Eyebright," he stuck to her all the evening,'—but Valerie attached no importance to this statement, she always took such remarks with a grain of salt. The Canon was inclined to view most things through a rosy-hued pair of spectacles; his geese, even the dingiest of them, were transformed into swans.

'Don't you believe him, Marmee,' annotated Pansy; 'the millionaire was as stiff and proper as possible. If we had been Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy we could not have conversed with more decorum. Dad gave me a new frock, and it fitted me to perfection—and oh, I must tell you one ridiculous little incident, just to make you laugh.

'I was waiting for Dad in the drawing-room, before the guests came, so I tried to get a good view of my frock in the big pier-glass—you know how one twirls and pirouettes before a glass—well, I was just spinning round like a humming-top, with my head on one side, when I saw a pair of amused eyes in the glass, and there was the navvy—yes, I feel spiteful, and I will call him the navvy—standing in the middle of the room staring at me. If Doris had been caught in that ridiculous fashion she would have turned as red as fire, but I only made him an Elizabeth Bennet sort of

curtsey. "Good evening," Mr. Fordham," I said quite coldly. "I did not hear our butler announce you; I was too busily engaged in seeing if my new dressmaker had done herself credit." That was not so bad, was it, Marmee? I thought he seemed a little taken aback.

'He looked as grave as a judge after that, and was as civil as possible. He is dining at the Hammonds' on Thursday—there is to be a sort of evening party afterwards, and I am to go with Doris and Janet, and I daresay we shall have plenty of fun.'

'They seem very gay,' thought Valerie, with an involuntary sigh. Her husband had only paid her two flying visits, and had each time made Pansy his excuse for not staying longer. 'You might have asked Mrs. Walcott to have her,' observed Valerie in rather an aggrieved voice. 'Pansy would have been quite safe at the Deanery.' But it appeared that Pansy had objected to this arrangement, and it had been impossible for Canon Thurston to leave her.

'How long is Mr. Fordham going to stay in Wycombe?' was her next question; but there seemed no answer forthcoming to this. Pansy's next letter only gave a graphic account of a lecture and conversazione at the schoolhouse, and contained also an enthusiastic description of some tableaux the Granthams were getting up for Doris's birthday party.

'We are to have some scenes from the dear old fairy stories,' she wrote. '*Beauty and the Beast*, *Cinderella*, and *Little Red Riding Hood*, and *Fatima and Sister Anne*. What do you think, Marmee? I am to be Beauty, and I have the loveliest dress in the world, and Mr. Fordham is to be the Beast. He takes a great deal of interest in the preparations and works like a navvy, while Doris and I order him about.'

'Pansy seems bent on amusing herself,' was Valerie's sole thought as she laid down the letter. Christmas was always a gay time for the young people of Wycombe. Valerie knew nothing about those meetings on the Cathedral green, and the hours spent by Mr. Fordham in her husband's cosy study; so when the news came to her early in February it broke upon her with the suddenness of a cataclysm.

She read the first passage in her husband's letter five or six times over before she could gleam the least meaning out of it.

'Our letters will have prepared you, my dear Valerie,' it began, 'for the news I have to impart; indeed I flatter myself that you will be the only lady in Wycombe to whom it will be no matter of surprise. Fordham has spoken at last. He makes no secret that his heart is bound up in our little girl. He simply worships the ground she walks on. He came to an understanding with the dear child the day before yesterday, and they are now engaged.' It was this passage that Valerie read and re-read, until she grew quite irritable over it. 'How is one to grasp the impossible?' she muttered, and then she went on with the letter.

'Our little Eyebright seems very happy with her big, stalwart lover in tow. She puts on pretty princess airs with him already, and makes him fetch and carry for her.

'I wish you could see him, dearest, I think so much of my little wife's opinion; but I am sure you would like him. As I told you before, he is a rugged specimen of humanity, and wants polish. By the bye, that tableau of "Beauty and the Beast" brought things to a climax. I never saw the child look more charming

than she did that night. Every one was admiring her, and Mrs. Grantham said to me that she was more like a white rosebud than a pansy.

'I have just had a long talk with Donaldson. You know he went out to Sydney two years ago, after that terrible illness of his; that is where he first met Fordham.

'Fordham has a grand business there, and seems coining money. But he talks of retiring and settling in England—his only tie out there is a sister, who has married and settled in Sydney. Her husband is a solicitor, and Fordham makes his home with them.

'He is not a young man—about thirty-three, Donaldson says—but this discrepancy in their ages will matter less as time goes on.' ('Discrepancy,' thought Valerie; 'he is sixteen years older.') 'Of course I have told Fordham that our little girl is too young to marry at present, and that I should wish them to wait until he has wound up his business affairs. I am afraid he was rather disappointed when I said this.

'"That means a two years' absence," he said in quite a sad voice; but I cheered him up to the best of my ability. I have just been over to the Deanery to tell them the news. The Dean was a little bit cut and dried over it—you know his way; and if I had announced Pansy's funeral Mrs. Walcott could not have looked more solemn. "Mr. Fordham is very nice," she said, "and we both like him, but do you think he will make Pansy happy?" You must not think, my dear love, that I do not appreciate your friend, but I must confess she is excessively damping sometimes. Pansy is writing to you, so I will say no more to-day.—Your devoted husband,

'ALBAN THURSTON.'

Pansy's letter was as follows, and was evidently written in a great hurry, to judge from an ugly smudge or two.

'You poor, dear, pretty little Marmee,' it began, 'have we quite, quite taken your breath away. To think your little girl is an engaged young lady—why, I can hardly credit it myself. I make believe sometimes, and shut my eyes, and pretend I am the schoolgirl Pansy, and then I open them and look at my ring,—it is such a splendid one. Dad says the diamonds are magnificent, and that it must be worth a hundred and fifty pounds at least. Fancy wasting all that money on a little insignificant chit like me.

'Last evening Gurth (I call him Gurth, you know —isn't it an odd name? but it suits him somehow) brought me a lovely pair of bracelets made of Australian gold. They were just the duckiest things, but I was not a bit gracious.

'"When I wear them," I said quite seriously, "I shall feel like a white slave in fetters."

'It was a rude speech and rather unkind, but we had only been engaged two days, and he was smothering me with presents,—

> 'Gold! and gold! and gold without end!
> He had gold to lay by, and gold to spend.

But for once my gentleman navvy was equal to the occasion.

'"You are my princess; it is I who am the slave," he said in his slow, gentle sort of drawl. "I only wish it were in my power to fetter you to me; but my bangles will not hurt you, dear."

'Marmee, I do wish you were here. I never wanted you more in my life. I am sure you would like Gurth;

he is one of your sort—speaks the truth and shames the devil. He is rather like a big Newfoundland dog, and he makes other people look small. One day, as we were walking on the green, I told him that if a mad dog came round the corner I should hide myself behind him, and he made such a nice answer—

'"I should like to fight all your battles for you, Miss Thurston"—for he had not proposed then—"and to have the right to protect you." That was coming rather near the point, was it not? but I would not let him go on—but I was rather out of breath when we met Dad.

'Really Gurth has a charming temper, nothing seems to put him out, and he is as solid and steady as old time. He is not a talking man, and sometimes I find it difficult to keep up a conversation. He does not see a joke quickly; and then his people are strangers to me, and we have so few interests in common. When I told Dad that, he said most wives and husbands have to learn each other's tastes. I don't believe Gurth has any tastes, except yachting and making money. He seems very fond of his nieces and nephews, though, and plays cricket with them. He says the dream of his life is to have a home of his own, but that the Colonial girls are not to his taste.

'"I was waiting for my little Eyebright," he observed. He actually calls me that; he says the name just suits me down to the ground. Marmee, you must come home—you really must, for Gurth has taken his passage in the *Boscastle*, and she starts next week. I don't quite know why he is hurrying back, for he meant to stay another six weeks, but he seems rather dissatisfied with his partner, and he has heard something that makes him anxious.

'And now good-bye, Marmee dear, and write, write, write to your loving little daughter, PANSY.'

'Poor child,' murmured Valerie, 'poor innocent little child. What does she know about love and lovers, just out of the schoolroom. Her fancy is touched, and she likes the importance of her position, but he has not won her heart.' And then Valerie's face grew set and stern as she thought of her husband's imprudence in entrusting his motherless girl to a stranger's keeping.

'Mr. Fordham's large fortune has tempted him,' she thought contemptuously, and all that day the lines that Pansy had so persistently quoted seem to ring in her ears—

> Gold to give, and gold to lend,
> And reversions of gold in future.

'Oh, if I had only been there,' she groaned; but the grey waves rolling towards her only seem to echo the words, 'Gold, and gold, and gold without end,' in a monotonous, steady refrain.

CHAPTER X

'SHE WILL STICK TO IT'

'In the actual world—the painful kingdom of time and place—dwell care, and canker, and fear. With thought, with the ideal, is immortal hilarity, the rose of joy. Round it all the muses sing.'—EMERSON.

IT seemed to Valerie at that time as though Fate had ordained that she and Gurth Fordham were not to meet.

The very day before that fixed for their return Ronald developed feverish symptoms; and though after all it only proved a mere passing ailment, it was considered wiser for him not to travel for a few days. And when at last they arrived at Wycombe, Gurth Fordham was on his way back to Melbourne.

There was very little said the first evening. Canon Thurston was too well pleased to have his wife and son home again, to be anxious to enter into any awkward discussions, and Valerie was thankful for the reprieve.

Privately she thought that Pansy was looking older and a little thinner, as though she had lived at too high a pressure. Her girlish freshness was impaired, and her spirits somewhat forced.

'She feels parting with Fordham,' observed Canon Thurston, when his wife hinted gently at this change. 'Poor fellow, he was awfully cut up at leaving her.'

Before long Valerie thought it better to drop all mention of Pansy's unlucky engagement. She and her husband were at utter variance on the subject, and each held their own opinion with great tenacity. Valerie's truthful nature allowed of no compromise; she thought her husband had acted most unwisely and imprudently; and Canon Thurston, who prided himself on his penetration and foresight in all worldly and spiritual matters, had been much affronted at Valerie's plain speaking.

'I suppose I have my own child's interest at heart,' he had said, with a blackness of brow that was most unusual to the courteous and polished Canon. And Valerie, with wifely meekness, had striven to appease his wrath.

'Dear Alban,' she returned, 'I have no wish to make you angry, but if I were her own mother I could not love Pansy more, or be more anxious for her welfare. We do not agree in this matter, but at least I know how to be silent, and I will promise you that I will say no more about it'; and Canon Thurston, who was peace-loving by nature, had been conciliated by this speech.

So things became smooth again, but inwardly Valerie was ill at ease. Every day she was more and more convinced that Pansy's affections were not really engaged, and that only girlish vanity and love of importance had hurried her into accepting Gurth Fordham; and though she talked constantly of her absent lover, there was very little tenderness in her manner, and none of the shy reticence usual to girls in her position.

One day when she and her step-mother were alone, Pansy began dancing about the room in her old wild

fashion, and shaking her little gold manacles merrily as she did so.

'Gurth calls these bangles,' she observed, 'but I told him they were my fetters—the sign and seal of my serfdom. I am to have a diamond star next. It is rather nice being engaged, is it not, Marmee? I said to Gurth one day that I hoped we should be engaged for seven years. I don't think he was quite pleased when I said that. He got rather pale, and answered very gravely that he should make a bad sort of Jacob, but that of course it was only my fun, and he looked at me so pitifully that I told a white lie and said "yes" of course; but I really meant it; I have no genius for matrimony.'

'A few months ago you told me that nothing would induce you to be an old maid,' returned Valerie, with a forced smile.

'Well, that's true,' remarked Pansy frankly. 'I should hate to be an old maid; but I don't want to be married until I am thirty-five. Let me see, Gurth would be over fifty then—quite an old, old man; getting bald too, and with a shiny forehead, and very likely horrid little grey whiskers.'

'Pansy, how can you be so absurd'; but Pansy was in one of her 'electric moods,' and refused to listen.

'Why cannot one remain young; it is so stupid and uninteresting to grow old. Marmee, seriously, I don't believe in wedded bliss one bit; fancy two people, two ordinary people, having to make conversation for each other for the rest of their lives; the very idea makes one yawn with weariness.'

'I do not think that people who are really in love find any difficulty on this score,' replied Valerie, with a slight meaning in her tone, and then Pansy changed

colour and became silent; that time the arrow had reached its mark, and for a week or two Pansy did not once mention Gurth's name.

She wrote to him constantly, and seemed to find much pleasure in her correspondence. She showed Valerie one or two of his letters. Valerie was surprised to find that they both touched and interested her.

Mr. Fordham wrote like a man unused to much correspondence; his style was a little laboured and heavy, but no stiff sentences could hide his natural goodness of heart and his overflowing tenderness for his young betrothed.

When Valerie had read the first letter, she handed it back and said very gravely, 'That letter was written by an honest man; and Pansy, my dear child, he loves you very dearly'; but Pansy had made no reply to this in words, only her lips were quivering as though she were strongly moved.

But there came a day when Pansy ceased to dance and shake her golden manacles, and when she lost all hope of the diamond star, when the tide set dead against Gurth Fordham and misfortune overwhelmed him, when with a breaking heart he wrote to Pansy to tell her that he was a ruined man, and to give her back her freedom.

It appeared that his partner had deceived him, and during his absence in England had entered into some disastrous speculations. Things had gone from bad to worse; news of some risky investment had at last reached his brother-in-law's ears, and Mr. Dunbar had written off to Gurth Fordham, urging him to return at once. But the mischief was already done; Gurth Fordham found himself involved in difficulties of all kinds; his business prestige weakened, his capital re-

duced, and before he could see his way to retrieve matters, his wretched partner absconded with all the money upon which he could lay his hands.

'I am a ruined man, my darling,' wrote Gurth, 'but I am not base or selfish enough to hold you to your engagement; you are free, dear, as free as the English lark, to which I once compared you. When you show this letter to the Canon, he will say that I have done well, and that at least I am acting like an honest man.

'Mortimer has left me with a host of debts and liabilities that threaten to swamp us completely; at present I can see no way of clearing myself. I shall have to take my courage in both hands and begin again to climb the lowest rung of the ladder. No diamond star for my blue-eyed Princess, only good-bye, and God bless her.'

As Valerie read this letter her eyes were full of tears; but Pansy's were bright and excited.

'Read this too, Marmee,' she said in an odd little voice; 'it is from his sister, Mrs. Dunbar.'

'My dear Miss Thurston,' it began, 'I must write to you, but I am doing so secretly, for fear my menfolk forbid me to put pen to paper; we poor women have our household tyrants, have we not? And even Gurth, for all his good-nature, can put his foot down very stiffly when he chooses.

'Oh dear! we are so unhappy about Gurth. It just breaks my heart to see him go about the house with that sad look on his face. When he sits down to his meals, I hardly dare to speak to him; and the children, who adore him, hold aloof from him. One day, darling Tina ventured to stand beside him, hoping that he would notice or caress her, but he did not seem to see

her, and quite pushed her away. Tina is the most sensitive little creature in the world, and I had some difficulty in comforting her. "It can't be Bear," she kept sobbing, "not my dear Bear," for the naughty children always call him Bear.

'If Gurth goes on like this, he will have brain fever, for he eats little, and he scarcely sleeps; as he says, how can a man sleep with such a crushing weight on his mind. Oh, my dear Miss Thurston! why are such things permitted? Is it to try our weak faith? What has my poor Gurth done that he should be so punished; he who has never wronged any man, who has always been ready to help and befriend every one?

'This miserable creature Gilbert Mortimer owes much to him. When they were young men together Gilbert had typhoid fever, and would have died but for Gurth's care. Gurth nursed him day and night like a brother until his own people could come to him, and now he repays his benefactor by ruining him. Forgive me, my dear young lady, for telling you my trouble, but Gurth is my own only brother, and his joys and sorrows are mine. He has just told Harry, my husband I mean, that he intends to leave our house; but I am determined, and so is Harry, that he shall not do this. I would bar the door, like Catherine Douglas, with my own arm, before he carries out this monstrous resolution.

'Will you help me, my dear Miss Thurston? Your influence is all-powerful, and a word from you will bring him to reason. If you can comfort him, I shall be truly grateful.—Yours most affectionately,

'MARY DUNBAR.'

'Thank you for showing me this letter, Pansy,' observed Valerie, as she replaced it in the envelope.

'Mr. Fordham is indeed to be pitied; but at least he has one blessing—he has a devoted sister.'

'Yes, indeed,' returned Pansy in a low voice, 'he thinks there are few people to come up to his sweet Mollie, as he calls her; he says she is not a bit pretty, but that every one thinks her lovely.'

'I understand what he means, Pansy; a good loving heart often beautifies a plain face,' and then Valerie paused. 'Dear child,' she continued, 'you must not think that I do not sympathise with you and Mr. Fordham if I say that it will be wise of you to accept the release he offers you; indeed, I mean it, Pansy,' as the girl flashed an indignant look at her. 'You see what he says himself. He is overwhelmed with debts and difficulties, and has to work again from the very beginning.'

'What of that,' returned Pansy in her impetuous young voice. 'Do you suppose after all I have told you that I am in any hurry to be married. I shall write to-morrow and tell Gurth that I shall be content to wait for him ten years.'

'But, my dear!'

'Marmee, I am ashamed of you, to think that you are as mercenary and worldly-minded as the rest of them. If Gurth be noble and generous, is there any reason why I should act meanly? Would you have me engage myself to a man when he is rich, and then forsake him when he is poor? Should I deserve the name of a woman if I behaved so shamefully?'

'Darling, you must not be so angry with me. I am only speaking for your good. Listen to me for one moment. I have never spoken to you on this subject. I think your engagement was a mistake. If I had been here, I would have told you so before, but my opinion was never asked.'

'Why a mistake, Marmee?' and Pansy looked both hurt and perplexed. 'Gurth is a little rough, but he is as good as gold.'

'I do not doubt it for one moment; no one but a good man could have written that letter. As far as I am concerned, I would willingly entrust your future happiness to his keeping, but——'

'I hate buts,' returned Pansy crossly.

'And so do I, but we cannot write our life sentences without them, and there is a big But here. Pansy, if I thought that Gurth Fordham had won your whole heart, I should not have a word to say, no, not if you told me you would spend your life in waiting for him.'

Valerie spoke with a sort of restrained passion, as though her heart were too full to keep silence. Pansy looked at her in astonishment.

'Marmee, what do you mean?' she faltered. 'I am very fond of Gurth.'

'You are very fond of me and of your father and Doris,' returned Valerie impatiently. 'You have an affectionate nature, and you find it easy to love people, but all this is beside the question. What I want to know is this—is Gurth Fordham the one man in the world to you? Does his love—for he does love you most truly, Pansy—does the thought of his protective tenderness make your earthly paradise? Is his presence your delight and his absence a continual weight? Do you think of him when you wake and when you close your eyes at night? Do you think his thoughts and strive to live up to his standard?'

'Stop, stop!' exclaimed Pansy in an agitated voice. 'No one ever talked like this to me before. Earthly paradise! One might as well talk of moonlight and

nightingales and that sort of rubbish. Marmee, I don't believe that you ever felt all that sort of thing for father; you were much too sensible.'

'I was not sensible then, Pansy,' returned Valerie in a very sad voice, for the memory of her lost idyll was always bitter. 'I was very much in love—and I would not have changed places with the Queen on her throne—I would have lived cheerfully on a desert island if your father had wished; desert do I say, it would have blossomed like a rose to me. Just now you called me worldly-minded and mercenary because I wanted you to give up Gurth, but if your father had been a beggar I would not have given him up, and if death had divided us, then I should have lived unmarried for his sake. I am more sensible now,' and here a look of pain crossed Valerie's face. 'I have grown wiser and know that even earthly paradises have their thorns and briers, but still I am faithful to my ideal of love.'

Pansy had grown strangely pale. 'It must be very beautiful,' she said in a low voice, as though to herself; 'it must be nice to feel like that, Marmee. I suppose that I am not quite what you call in love. I am not a bit miserable without Gurth, and I wasn't really so very sorry to let him go. I was fond of him, but he often bored me, and I wanted to get rid of him. You see he is not a bit clever, and he is slow at taking a joke; you have to hammer it in somehow. Did you ever want to push Dad away when he put his arm round you?' Then Valerie smiled and shook her head.

'Oh, but I have over and over again. Gurth is so dreadfully affectionate; he is what you call a demonstrative man; he was always wanting to hold my hand, and I often found it very trying, and he sometimes

complained of my coldness to him. I remember once he told me I was "as unfeeling as a blue-eyed kitten," —that was very severe.'

'Dear Pansy, every word you say only proves that I am right.'

'Yes, I know,' with a sigh, 'but I am not going to tell lies even for Gurth's sake. Look here, Marmee, I don't believe I shall ever be one of your ideal lovers; that sort of thing would not agree with my constitution; it is too enervating. I want something more bracing. Gurth is not the least bit of a hero in my eyes; he is a great strong burly navvy of a man, and he is humble and kind-hearted and good to children and kittens and all living creatures. I don't believe that he would tread on a worm if he could help it.'

'And what is the outcome of all this?' asked Valerie in a tired voice, but she knew Pansy's answer beforehand.

'It is this,' returned the girl firmly, 'that I mean to stick to Gurth, and that whether I love him in the right way or not, that I utterly refuse to spoil his life or to give him up.'

'Then I will say no more.' Valerie spoke in a constrained voice; she had done her best and had failed, and she was turning away as though to bring the conversation to a close, when she felt a soft cheek laid against hers.

'Yes, but you must not be hurt with me, Marmee,' and Pansy spoke in a coaxing voice; 'you have done your duty, and now you must let me do mine,' and how could Valerie refuse to kiss and make friends.

Valerie told her husband of her attempt to shake Pansy's allegiance to her betrothed; she knew that it would meet with his approval, and she was not wrong.

'I am greatly indebted to you, my love,' he said in a patronising manner. 'I was about to seek your help in the matter. Pansy must break off her engagement. I cannot have my only daughter marry a beggar. Poor Fordham, I pity him from my heart, but he has done the right thing. Well, well, I will speak to the child myself. She needs a firm hand and a tight rein,' and then the Canon put his papers together rather fussily and desired that Pansy should be sent to him at once.

When the interview was over, Valerie again sought her husband's study. He looked subdued and crest-fallen, and the marks of defeat were evident on his countenance.

'Dear Alban, I am afraid you have had a trying time,' she observed in a soothing tone.

Then he burst into sudden anger.

'Pansy is a disobedient child. To my very face she flatly refuses to break her engagement. She has no respect for her father's opinion, no reverence for his grey hairs. She is contumacious, insolent. She has said things to me that ought never to have passed a daughter's lips.'

'I am sure, dear, that Pansy never intended to be disrespectful.'

'All the same, I am justly offended with her. I have told her that I wash my hands of the consequences; that if she chooses to spoil her life waiting for Fordham, she can do so, and can marry him when she is of age, but that I would have no hand in such a marriage.'

'And what answer did she make?'

'Oh, that she was very sorry to act in opposition to my wishes, but that having entered into the engagement with my sanction, she did not think it right to break her word, and with that she went away. But

she will stick to it, Valerie. Pansy is as obstinate as a mule.'

'Yes, she will stick to it,' echoed his wife sorrowfully. This conversation had taken place more than five years before, and Pansy was still engaged to Gurth Fordham.

CHAPTER XI

A LETTER FROM MELBOURNE

'I love not to be forced to love, for love must arise of the heart, and not by constraint.'—MALORY, *Morte d'Arthur.*

VALERIE had convinced her husband with some difficulty that it would be wiser not to put any further pressure on the girl, but to wait for fresh developments, and he had reluctantly agreed to this.

Pansy showed no signs of repentance for her self-assertion. Her spirits were as high as ever, and she wore her shackles lightly

She still wrote her sparkling girlish letters, which were as welcome to the lonely, sorely-tried man as the sight of some clear pellucid stream to some parched wanderer in a desert. 'You give me new life,' he wrote. 'The day I have one of your dear letters is a great day with me.'

And Mrs. Dunbar wrote too, full of sisterly gratitude and with a sweet womanliness that charmed Pansy, 'You are well named Pansy,' she said once, 'for you are a veritable heart's-ease, and thanks to you, my dear Gurth is a different man. He says he has some heart in his work now, and that he is no longer without hope. Ah! if you could only hear some of his speeches. He

says again and again that few girls would have acted as you have done. You are our good angel, Pansy, and from my heart I bless you for your goodness to my poor boy.'

Pansy kept these letters to herself and read them over and over again. Ever since her conversation with her step-mother she had grown chary of her confidences. Now and then she would say a word or two about Gurth's prospects. During the first two years after his return to Melbourne he had worked hard to keep his head above water. The third year things grew brighter, and he seemed more sanguine of success.

'He thinks he will soon pay off all his liabilities,' Pansy remarked in a triumphant tone, 'but Mrs. Dunbar says he works far too hard, and that I must write and scold him'; but when Valerie repeated this to her husband he only shook his head despondently.

'He is a hard fighter,' he said, 'and shows plenty of pluck, but he will be a poor man for years to come, and he is certainly not the husband for Pansy.' The unfortunate engagement had weighed heavily on the Canon's mind during his illness, but as Valerie had predicted, her father's dying message had failed to move Pansy.

'The dead cannot judge for the living,' she had said. 'My dear old Dad knows better now,' and Valerie had thought it prudent to hold her peace. But after her husband's death her thoughts were much occupied with Pansy.

The day after their visit to Roadside, Valerie was passing through the hall, when she saw a letter with the Melbourne postmark lying on the table. Pansy had just crossed the close to speak to Doris Grantham and would return shortly, so Valerie left it there to meet

her eye. She had a good deal of business to transact in the town, and it was nearly luncheon-time before she re-entered the house.

'Has Miss Thurston returned, Palmer?' she inquired as she glanced at the hall table. There was no letter there, and she felt she had asked a needless question.

'Oh dear, yes, ma'am. Miss Thurston came in quite an hour and a half ago, but I believe she is still in the drawing-room,' and as Valerie wanted to ask Pansy's opinion on a purchase she had just made, she went in search of her.

To her surprise Pansy was still in her walking dress. She was seated by a table, and a letter lay open before her. As Valerie entered she started, and began folding it up hastily. Something in her manner attracted Valerie's attention.

'I hope you have no bad news, dear?' she asked a little gravely. 'That is from Mr. Fordham, is it not?'

'Yes, and there is one from Mary Dunbar too,' returned Pansy hurriedly; 'she writes quite regularly now. The children have had whooping-cough, and she has been very busy, and her husband has been ill too.'

Valerie listened to this with scant patience; she saw plainly that Pansy was simply evading her question. She felt convinced that something was amiss. The girl's hands were shaking as she folded the sheets, and there was a red spot on either cheek, always a sign of agitation with Pansy.

'Dear Pansy, please tell me,' she urged persuadingly. 'Do not put me off like this; we two are alone, and we can surely confide in each other; of course I see something is troubling you.'

'I did not mean to tell you yet,' returned Pansy

reluctantly, for she was touched at this appeal, 'not at least until I had thought things over. When one is worried there is nothing to be gained by worrying other people,' but Valerie objected to this philosophical view of the case.

'Your troubles are mine, Pansy,' she said gently; but Pansy was too preoccupied to respond to this little appeal, on the contrary it seemed to irritate her.

'I was not talking of real troubles,' she said impatiently, 'but now and then one gets perplexed, Marmee. I see you are determined to drag it out of me, and I did not want you to know. Gurth has written to ask me to go out to him.'

Valerie felt as though she had received a sudden blow. 'Impossible! I will not believe that.'

'Ah, but it is true for all that; he wants me to go out as soon as possible, and be married from his sister's house. Poor Marmee, I see it has taken your breath away, and no wonder. I have been all this time trying to grasp the situation.'

'Pansy,' interrupted Valerie, 'you must not do it. I will not hear of it for a moment. When Mr. Fordham wishes you to marry him, he must come and fetch you himself. Does he suppose that your friends will allow you to go to the other end of the world alone? I am disappointed in Mr. Fordham,' she continued angrily. 'He is like other men, selfish and thinking of his own convenience'—for Valerie was too startled and anxious to be perfectly just; the mere idea of losing Pansy made her miserable. She felt as though she must put her arms round the girl to keep her safe. 'No, no, you shall not do it,' she kept repeating. Pansy was quite confounded at her vehemence.

'Marmee, dear, you must not misjudge him,' she

said pleadingly. 'Gurth is not really selfish, he is only tired of being engaged, and he wants a wife and a home of his own. That is what he says.

'But is this a time for marrying,' asked Valerie a little sternly; then Pansy's eyes filled with tears.

'No, but Gurth doesn't know that, my letter has not reached him, when he reads it he will be sorry that he asked me to do it. Let me explain a little, Marmee, for I do not want you to blame him, and then we can talk things over. Gurth says that he is making a fair income now, and that his business improves every year. He feels that he can afford to marry and to have a house of his own, the only difficulty is that he cannot well leave his business to fetch me, and then he asks me if I will come to him instead. Ah! there is the gong for luncheon, and we must go in and make a pretence to eat, or Palmer will fuss himself to death.'

'Wait a moment,' implored Valerie, 'we will go directly,' but Pansy had already hurried to the door.

'We must wait until afterwards,' she said, with her favourite little shrug of the shoulders. 'Pull yourself together, Marmee, and remember your duty as an Englishwoman—"eat when you are not hungry, laugh when you are sad, and sing when you want to cry, and above all, look amiable when you feel as cross as two sticks,"' and with this remarkable *credo* of the whole duty of woman, Pansy seated herself and unfolded her napkin. 'Grace before meat,' she muttered to herself; 'but I am not a bit thankful, neither is Marmee.'

It was a miserable meal, and on comparing notes afterwards, they both agreed that the cutlets, which were done to a turn, might have been chopped straw for all they knew. Palmer hovered over them anxiously, and pressed the pudding on them with the freedom of

an old servant. 'It is your favourite amber pudding, Miss Pansy,' he remonstrated as she waved it away.

Pansy gave an hysterical little laugh as the old butler left the room.

'Isn't he an old dear?' she exclaimed. 'I do believe he and Mrs. Jackson consider amber pudding a sovereign remedy against all trouble. Marmee, there is one blessing that we shall enjoy at Roadside, we shall have no one to watch how many mouthfuls we swallow.'

'And how about the amber pudding?' asked Valerie rather sadly, but Pansy only raised her eyebrows at this question; but the next minute her expression changed to actual annoyance.

'Good lack, Marmee,' she exclaimed with excitement, 'I do believe that is the Cunninghams' carriage; no one else has those roan horses,'—then with some sinking of heart Valerie went to the window.

'Yes, it is the Cunninghams,' she said quietly. 'Sir Francis and Lady Cunningham, and I think Myra is with them. We had better go into the drawing-room, and leave Palmer to re-lay the table in case they want luncheon.'

The Cunninghams were cousins of Lady Emma, and lived at Hedrington Hall, a few miles from Wycombe. Valerie had never felt herself in touch with them, though she was bound to show them civility for her husband's sake. Privately she thought Sir Francis narrow-minded and dogmatic, and his wife supercilious and worldly-minded, and she was well aware that she was no favourite with them; they were the last people that she cared to see, and it was especially trying when she was longing to finish her talk with Pansy.

Their visit agreeably disappointed her expectations, for it was shorter than usual. They would not hear of

having luncheon, they had had a snack—a favourite word with Sir Francis—before they left the Hall; it was always the Hall with Lady Cunningham, never home,—an early cup of tea, well, they would not refuse that while the horses were resting; and then Pansy rushed away to order Palmer to bring every form of cake and light refreshment he could lay hands on, an order that apparently gave him much gratification.

'I forgot one clause in my woman's *credo*,' thought Pansy, as she re-entered the room, '"to talk when one wishes to be silent," and to that detestable Myra, too'; and Pansy smiled grimly as she remembered telling her step-mother once that Myra Cunningham was just a cross between a gnat and a peacock butterfly.

She found the two ladies sitting with their handkerchiefs to their eyes, and Sir Francis pacing the room in his usual fussy fashion. Valerie, who had laid aside her bonnet, was looking pale, and wore an expression of forced passivity on her face. Pansy heard the words 'Poor cousin Alban,' and then Myra, who prided herself on her sensitive feelings, sobbed aloud.

Lady Cunningham was pronouncing a pious eulogy on the dear departed, which Sir Francis was annotating to his best of his ability. According to them the Canon's character was without a single flaw.

'You must take courage, my dear Valerie,' she went on in her unctuous voice, 'from your dear husband's saintly example. How well I remember after dear Emma's death, when I was trying to console him, that he said to me so beautifully, "There is no death to those who love." I have never forgotten those words'; and again Myra sobbed.

'He is with cousin Emma, mamma, now,' she observed in a choked voice. Then Pansy gave a little

gasp of dismay. What a thing to say to a newly-made widow. No wonder a dull flush crossed Valerie's face. The gnat could sting still. Even Lady Cunningham seemed taken aback.

'My dear Myra,' she began feebly; but Valerie's quiet voice interposed.

'I hope so. I trust so. And the thought gives me pleasure. Your father always loved your mother dearly, did he not, Pansy. In that world "where there is neither marrying nor giving in marriage," there can be no room for jealousy or selfish monopoly. Did not the dear Master say that we should be like the angels,' and Valerie reverently bowed her head.

'I never saw any one so much gone off as Valerie Thurston,' was Lady Cunningham's remark as the carriage rolled off from the door. 'She was really a pretty creature when Alban married her, though even then she had no style; but now she has quite lost her good looks.'

'I cannot say I agree with you, Lavinia,' returned Sir Francis, who seemed to consider it a matter of principle to differ from his family on all occasions. 'She was a little palish, but under the circumstances one might expect that; but she is a most interesting-looking person. That reddish-brown hair and creamy complexion are so uncommon'; for Sir Francis was, as his wife well knew and deeply resented, a great critic on feminine beauty.

'Well, well, we hold different opinions; that's all,' she returned tartly, for, being plump and florid, it hardly pleased her to hear Valerie's pale complexion praised so warmly. 'But at least you will agree with me, Francis, that it is hardly decent to see her in a black bonnet without a veil and widow's cap,' and Lady

Cunningham held up her tightly-gloved hands in horror; but her husband merely pished and pshawed at this.

'That's over,' exclaimed Pansy in a tone of relief, as the fat roan horses turned the corner; and she made an expressive gesture with her hands, as though she were brushing off some noxious insects. 'Buzz-buzz, whizz-whizz; Mr., Mrs., and Miss Gnat. Oh, you poor, little Marmee, you looked as meek and miserable as a mouse in a trap. There, let me send tea away, and then we can be comfortable. Won't Palmer be pleased when he sees the dishes. They look as though we had had an army of locusts. No wonder my Lady is so sleek and well conditioned, if she eats hot cakes and buttered toast to that extent; but then they had had only a snack, you see,' and naughty Pansy imitated Sir Francis' slightly nasal tones.

She broke out afresh when Palmer had carried off the tea-tray.

'What do you think that horrid Myra said to me, Marmee? That she supposed I shouldn't wait for Mr. Fordham to make a fortune now.' And then Mother Gnat chimed in: 'They all considered my engagement such a fortunate thing. Under the circumstances, I might have found a difficulty in securing a good husband; but now they hoped that I should settle as soon as possible, and that of course you would take Ronald away from Mr. Carfax, and send him to the Grammar School.'

'Oh, please, don't tell me any more,' and Valerie put up her hands to her head. 'The afternoon has been torture to me. Job and his friends in modern nineteenth-century dress are hardly to my taste.' And then she added plaintively, 'My heart has been as heavy as lead all the time with the thought of that

unfinished conversation. Do, for pity's sake, put me out of my misery, Pansy.' Then Pansy became serious.

'Marmee, dear, I am very sorry for Gurth; but you know I could not go to him.'

'Oh, my darling, how thankful I am to hear you say that.'

'No, no; there is no cause for thankfulness. I am only foolish and cowardly, or I should not be shirking my duty in this fashion.'

'It would not be your duty, dear.'

'Ah, but it is. I will lay no such flattering unction to my soul. If I have promised to marry Gurth, it is most certainly my duty to go out to him, if he cannot fetch me himself.'

'But he can come for you by and by.'

'Possibly; but not for another year or eighteen months, and even then he will find it hard to leave. You see, Marmee, he has no partner now, and everything depends on him. He has explained it all to me. He says that if I will only do this great thing for him, that he will be grateful to me all his life; and then his sister has written, telling me that my home is to be with them until the wedding-day, and that she will be mother to me as well as sister. Oh, it is such a dear letter.'

'But all the same you will not go.' Then Pansy's small face grew very white.

'Marmee, I do hate myself for being such a coward; but I cannot, I cannot; it is so long, and he has grown such a stranger. When I try to picture his face it seems to elude me. The last photo was quite different from the one I had. When he comes, if he ever does come, I feel as though I should have to

make his acquaintance over again.' Valerie was silent. Her fears had come true. Pansy was feeling the weight of her fetters at last.

'You must tell him that you would rather wait,' she said soothingly.

'Yes, I must tell him that; but all the same I am a miserable coward.' Then she suddenly threw herself into Valerie's arms, and broke into a passion of tears. 'Oh, Marmee, keep me, keep me; you don't want your poor little Ruth to leave you. I would die—I would rather die a hundred times over than cross the ocean to go to Gurth.'

CHAPTER XII

LADYBIRD FINDS A PURCHASER

'She seemed to establish a relation with every human being she came across, and it was almost impossible to hand her the salt, or to open the door for her, without receiving in a word or a look some recognition of your individuality. She always had a human relation with those with whom she did business, both great and small.'—*Memoir of Anne Clough.*

PANSY shut herself up in her own room the next day. Late in the afternoon, as Valerie came out of the drawing-room, she saw her stealing through the dusk with a letter in her hand, as though she were going to post it herself. But Valerie wisely took no notice.

To her relief, Pansy said a word or two when she wished her good-night.

'I have told Gurth that it would be better to wait, and that I could not leave you yet,' she whispered; and then, before Valerie could answer, she was gone.

Pansy did not recover herself for days. She had a pale shaken look, as though she had had a shock; her sensitive highly-strung nature was easily excited and depressed. By and by, as her panic passed, she gave her step-mother a droll account of her sensations.

'I feel as though there has been an earthquake, and as though I were morally and mentally all to pieces,' she

observed one day. 'I am just like that dear little Humpty Dumpty—I have had a great fall'; and then, in a whimsical voice, 'and not all the king's horses and all the king's men can put this little Humpty Dumpty up again.' And another time she travestied Shakepeare, and asserted, with much gravity, that she was a 'Queen of shreds and patches'—one part woman, and three parts coward—'and a cap and bells to crown all,' finished Pansy, in a fine, ironical drawl.

It was a good thing for both of them that there was plenty of occupation just then. They went down to Roadside every day to take measurements, and look after the workmen. The creepers had been trained, and the shrubs thinned, and the lawn was less like a field. Inside the house pretty art papers and fresh paint were making the rooms less dingy. But when all was done, nothing could improve the outlook. 'It will be our Roadside camp,' exclaimed Pansy one day, 'but it will never be home,' and Valerie was too much depressed herself to refute this.

When they reached home that day she found a letter from Mr. Lloyd. He informed her that he had spoken to Mr. Nugent about the pony, and he had seemed very keen on the subject. If Mrs. Thurston had no objection, he would call and inspect it the following afternoon. 'He wants it to be a surprise for his little girl,' wrote Mr. Lloyd. 'I have told him that we can arrange about the price afterwards'; and Valerie at once wrote a little note, giving the necessary permission.

She had never spoken to Mr. Nugent, but she knew him quite well by sight. He had been pointed out to her one day in the school cloisters, and she had sat opposite to him one Sunday afternoon in the choir of the Cathedral. She had been struck then by his melancholy

and abstracted look, and had spoken of it afterwards to Mrs. Walcott.

Another time she had met him on the Cathedral green, walking hand in hand with little Philippa, and they had both seemed talking with great animation; the child's face was quite dimpled and eager.

Mr. Nugent was certainly a striking-looking man. He was comparatively young, certainly not forty, but his iron-grey hair and smoothly-shaven face made him more like a grey-haired boy. A closer inspection, however, showed strong marks of undoubted intellect and power.

The mouth was the best feature in the face, the firm closely-shut lips proved sweetness as well as strength, and the absence of any moustache showed this most plainly. He was not tall, but carried himself well, and there was something of distinction that, even in a crowded room, would have attracted notice.

The two ladies were sitting at their work the next day when Mr. Nugent was announced. He came in with an alert lightness of tread which was natural to the man; and even in the moment of greeting Valerie was fully aware that the keen eyes had taken stock of herself and Pansy.

'Mr. Lloyd told me that you were anxious to dispose of a pony, Mrs. Thurston,' he said pleasantly. His voice was somewhat deep, and there was a peculiar timbre in it that struck on Valerie's ears.

'Yes; and it is a sad trouble to my poor boy,' she returned; 'but it is impossible for us to keep her. You will like to look at her, will you not?' and she took up her hat, and led the way out into the garden.

'I know your son,' observed Mr. Nugent, as they walked in the direction of the stables. 'He has just

joined my chemistry class, and seems a clever little fellow. He seems to me to know more than most boys of his age.'

'I am so glad to hear you say that,' returned Valerie, and her face lit up with animation. 'The Dean always says that Ronald is clever, and will make his mark some day.'

'There is no doubt of that, if he sticks to work. You must know, Mrs. Thurston, that I am a student of boy nature, and pride myself on understanding them. I love my work for the work's sake, and an idle life has no charms for me. Science and boys are my two hobbies.' Then Valerie smiled as though this confession was quite to her taste.

The next minute they were at the loose box, and Ladybird was thrusting her nose into Valerie's pocket in search of concealed dainties, and when these were not forthcoming, she began curvetting and prancing in an offended way. Mr. Nugent seemed much impressed with the pretty creature. He watched her closely, and had her put through her paces. And when at last he turned away, Valerie saw that it was a foregone conclusion that he would be the purchaser. Her heart sunk a little at the thought of Ronald's distress when he heard the news.

'I will try and see Lloyd to-morrow,' observed Mr. Nugent, as they returned to the house. 'It will be a delightful surprise for my little girl. She is not strong, and Dr. Franklin suggests that she should ride.'

'She looks very far from strong,' returned Valerie quickly. She was glad to have an opportunity of hinting at the child's loneliness. 'If her *bonne* were to play with her more. I have met them two or three

times on the green, and the little one has looked quite *triste* and dull.'

Mr. Nugent gave her a scrutinising look; then he frowned slightly, as though some thought troubled him.

'I have thought so myself more than once,' he returned slowly. 'An only child must be lonely. Marthe is very steady and reliable, and Madame Mercier believes in her. She is a protégée of her own, but she is not a lively person, and I doubt if she knows how to play.'

'I imagine not, from her appearance. But Wycombe abounds in little girls. Mrs. Hamerton has five at least, and two of them are just the age of your little Philippa.'

He looked surprised at her mention of the child's name, but he was evidently grateful for her interest; then a humorous smile played round his mouth.

'Poor little Phil,' he said tenderly, 'if she were only a boy I should know how to deal with her. I am very fond of my little daughter, Mrs. Thurston, but I am obliged to leave her to her grandmother's management'; and then he gave an abrupt sigh and changed the subject, and after a few casual observations he took his leave.

'Well, what do you think of Mr. Nugent, Pansy?' asked Valerie, in a somewhat interested tone, as she took up her work again, but Pansy seemed bored at the question.

'He looks too clever for my taste,' she returned with a shrug, 'he sees everything in a moment. I know he is very pleasant-mannered and gentlemanly, and not bad looking, and all that, but I do object to a person who takes you in, virtues and vices, weaknesses

and strong points in that quiet swooping fashion, like a human hawk.'

'Pansy, how can you be so absurd? it seems impossible for you to take anybody seriously.'

'Oh! I take Mr. Nugent seriously, I assure you; he is the sort of person who would set my nerves on edge in a moment. He has got an analytical eye. I object to analytical eyes, Marmee. He is the sort of man who will take you all to pieces to find out your motives, as Ron used to take out the works of the cuckoo clock to find where the sound was. We used to laugh at Ron for being such a baby, but one could not well laugh at Mr. Nugent.'

'You foolish child,' in a reproving voice, 'no one would think you were over one-and-twenty if they were to listen to your nonsense'; but Pansy, who was in one of her mischievous moods, turned a deaf ear to this. 'Of course he puts you together again, he is clever enough for that; but your favourite virtue is sure to be forgotten or mislaid. His analytical eye will overlook that. I quite wondered at your courage in going out with him, Marmee.'

Valerie could not repress a smile, she had wit enough to read between the lines. Pansy was a very popular little person, but she was somewhat spoiled. Mr. Nugent had rather ignored her, and she was rather huffy in consequence. Mr. Hawk's-eye, as she persisted in calling him that evening, had plainly not found favour in her eyes.

They would both have been surprised if they could have read Mr. Nugent's thoughts as he turned away from their door.

'They are two sweet women,' he said to himself. 'Coming out of the light, I was too confused for the

moment to know which was Mrs. Thurston, they both looked so young and slim; but of course I saw afterwards. The little pale girl with the blue eyes seemed very shy and silent.'

He walked on rapidly, now and then touching his hat to a passing boy. 'Mrs. Thurston interested me much,' he went on in the same soliloquising way, 'but I doubt if there is a sadder-hearted woman in Wycombe. Let me see; I met Canon Thurston once, and we had a good deal of conversation together; he was a florid talker. People thought a good deal of his sermons; he was considered an eloquent preacher. I remember I went to hear him, but I was disappointed—there was no depth, no evidence of thought and strong feeling, only pleasant images and melodious words.' He paused here to look at some lads playing down by the weir, and stood looking down into the dark water.

'He was not a strong man,' he continued. 'I remember I took his measure at once—that is why Mrs. Thurston surprises me. I never saw a truer face, and yet it tells so little. I wonder,' here he paused, 'if a man like Thurston could give her what she wanted?' and here his lips curled cynically. 'Sometimes in life, when a woman is parched with thirst she gets apples of Sodom offered her; and perhaps men have known this experience too. There is something in her face that expresses this.' The subject seemed to fascinate him, and he did not at once dismiss it, but as he came in sight of the old Old House, he roused himself from his reverie with manifest difficulty. 'Louise would have liked her,' he said, 'she would have liked them both. They are neither the usual type of women that one sees in Wycombe.'

For the first time Valerie dreaded the approach of

Sunday; she said so more than once to Pansy, but the girl pooh-poohed this.

'What is the use of making such a trouble of it, Marmee?' she said rather hard-heartedly. 'We all have to sacrifice something, and it is no worse for Ronald; he knows he must part with Ladybird, as there is no stabling at Roadside, even if we could afford to feed her'; and of course Valerie agreed to this sensible view of the case. Nevertheless, her mother's heart shrank from the thought of her boy's pain.

'Ron will soon get over it,' went on Pansy. 'Marmee, I am quite glad that we are all to have tea at the Deanery after service. It will be ever so much better for Ron,' but Valerie only sighed. She had reluctantly yielded to her friend's entreaties to spend the early part of Sunday evening at the Deanery, on the understanding that no one else was to be admitted, but she was in no mood for a social evening.

When Valerie broke the news to her boy, a dark flush came to Ronald's face. He did not say a word, but the moment she had finished he rushed away; half an hour afterwards she found him in the loose box with Ladybird, the poor boy had his arm round the pony's neck, and was sobbing as though his heart would break, and at the sight of her boy's distress Valerie could have found it in her heart to cry too.

For, after all, the sorrows of childhood and youth are terribly real; what to us seems a passing cloud will often obscure their entire heaven. In later life one has learnt to look for wider horizons and to bear dark and cloudy days with some degree of patience. 'The sunshine follows the rain,' we do not forget that; but to childish eyes no thought of future sunshine brings consolation, the trouble is there, the pain,

the darkness, the desolation; their misery is not remedial; their little boat is hopelessly shipwrecked.

It seems strange to apply the word despair to a child's trouble, and yet a baby-girl's grief over her broken doll is approximate to despair. 'Can you mend her dollie?' she asks, with her big blue eyes mere saucers of woe. If you shake your head, nothing but exhaustion will stem her tears, not even the promise of a new waxen baby; she will still weep like Niobe over the battered hulk of her beloved.

Valerie knew that her boy's grief at losing his pet would never be forgotten though his life should be ever so happy and prosperous; that when he was grown to man's estate and had children of his own he would still remember this sad Sunday afternoon when he bade farewell to his pampered favourite, and knowing this, she was very patient and tender with him; she even consented to his staying away from the afternoon service, at which Pansy professed to be much shocked.

By a curious coincidence they found themselves opposite to Mr. Nugent and his little girl in the choir, and Valerie could not help looking across at the child; she was beautifully dressed, but the cream-coloured silk smock and Gainsborough hat loaded with feathers only made her pale little face more insignificant than ever. Valerie thought she looked thinner and more pinched and wizened; but as the child caught sight of her, her great eyes brightened and a little pink flush came into her wan cheeks.

'How pretty she would be with a little colour and animation!' thought Valerie, 'but she looks like a plant kept without light and air'; and as the father and child were exactly within her range of vision, it was impossible for her not to see from time to time how closely

the little one nestled to his side, and how a tiny gloved hand showed itself under his arm.

She was waiting on the green for a moment after the service until Pansy could work her way through the crowd, when, to her surprise, Mr. Nugent accosted her.

'My little girl will not let me pass you,' he said with a pleasant smile; 'she is so anxious to speak to you. Well, Phil, what have you to say to Mrs. Thurston?'

The poor child seemed struggling with nervous shyness; her face grew crimson.

'What is it? Will you not tell me, my dear?' asked Valerie in a winning voice as she took the child's hand.

'Oh please, please,' and here Philippa seemed on the verge of tears, 'I was only so afraid that my nurse was so rude, and that you would be angry with us, when you were so kind—so kind.'

'Dear child, I was not the least angry, not the least little bit in the world.' Then Philippa's face cleared.

'Marthe is not English,' she said solemnly, 'and she makes mistakes. Father thinks that Gran would not have minded my speaking to a real lady—you said so, father, your own self; but Marthe quite pushed me away, and did not let me answer.'

'You see what a sensitive little lady it is,' observed Mr. Nugent with careless good-humour. He had been an attentive observer of this little scene. 'I believe the thought of Marthe's rudeness has rankled in her mind ever since.'

Valerie bent down and kissed her cheek. 'You must not trouble about it any more, my little Philippa,'

she said gently ; 'next time we meet on the green we will tell your *bonne* that your father will permit you to speak to me,' but she was rather surprised to find that the childish face remained anxious.

'Marthe does not seem to mind what father says,' she returned in a troubled tone ; 'it is always what Gran says.'

'Never mind that, Phil,' said Mr. Nugent, frowning slightly, 'I will have a talk with Gran,' and then he lifted his hat, and Valerie waved her hand to the child and joined Pansy, who was watching them curiously.

'So that is the new owner of Ladybird, is it?' observed Pansy in a dissatisfied voice. 'Fancy that washed-out insignificant little chit belonging to that striking-looking man.'

'Well, I don't know,' returned Valerie ; 'Phil has a pathetic little face of her own, and one could get very fond of her.' But Pansy had not time to say more, for the Dean had just left the Cathedral and had joined his wife at the Deanery gate, and they evidently were waiting for them.

CHAPTER XIII

MOTHER PEAK AND CO.

'Oh! it is excellent
To have a giant's strength; but it is tyrannous
To use it like a giant.'—*Measure for Measure.*

'Angels and ministers of grace defend us.'—*Hamlet.*

PHILIPPA held her father's hand tightly as they crossed the green. Every now and then she looked at him wistfully. He was so grave and silent, she thought, and the slight shade on that beloved face troubled her childish soul.

It was a sad proof of some defect in her bringing up, that the child's normal attitude to her elders was a tremulous, scarcely-to-be-concealed anxiety; she was always on the watch to ward off possible displeasure. Valerie's instinct had been perfectly correct when she likened her to a plant that was growing pallid from want of light and air; never was there a worse environment for any child than the home atmosphere at the Old House. Constant fault-finding and minute wearisome rules were the chief factors in Madame Mercier's scheme of education. She had drilled and schooled her own daughter, Philippa's mother, until she had lost all individuality and was only a passive tool in her hands,

without sufficient force of character to assert her own will; and now, Madame was beginning the same regime with her grandchild. Philippa's poor little colourless life would have been utterly miserable but for her father's tenderness; her happiest hours were those she spent with him, turning over big books of engravings in the library, or watching him in the laboratory when he was making some safe experiment; sometimes, when he was not too busy, he would answer her questions or give her some childish lesson in chemistry, and these were always red-letter days with Philippa.

'Father lets me mess about ever so, and never scolds me,' she said one day when the *bonne* was as usual finding fault with her; 'why are you always so cross, Marthe?' And the girl had been so much astonished at this unexpected self-assertion that she first stared at the child and then shook her roughly. 'Go, you are *méchante;* we shall see who is the cross one,' and poor Phil had no butter on her bread at tea-time, and found herself tucked up in bed an hour before the usual time.

How Philippa hated bed-time; she was a nervous little creature, and her imaginative and excitable nature conjured up all kinds of terrible fancies in the darkness.

If only Marthe would have left the door open, but this was always refused. Madame had desired her not to give way to such nonsense, the little Meess must shut her eyes and go to sleep, and so for long hours the poor child would lie watching the faint chink of firelight underneath the door, and try not to think that an old woman in a peaked hat was peeping at her between the curtains, and a funny little grinning dwarf was perched on the window-seat.

Philippa would shut her eyes and say her prayers

over and over again when Marthe had gone down to her supper.

Through the long night watches
May Thine angels spread
Their white wings above me,
Watching round my bed.

One evening Mr. Nugent, who had come up to the nursery to wish her good-night, was astonished to hear her repeating the one verse in an agitated, smothered voice, until he found her head was under the bed-clothes. As he spoke, she screamed aloud with terror.

'Why, Phil, you foolish Phil,' he said laughingly, 'how were you to hear me come in if you smother up your head in that ridiculous fashion'; but though he jested with her, he was inwardly dismayed to feel the cold sweat of terror on her forehead as she clung to him.

'O father, father,' she sobbed, 'I am so glad it is you, and not the old black witch in the corner; she does frighten me so'; but Mr. Nugent's only answer was to wrap her up in her little scarlet dressing-gown and carry her down to the library, where Phil spent a delicious hour eating sweet cakes and drinking warm milk, and talking out her childish terrors. In the soft lamplight, and cradled comfortably in her father's arms, it was easy for Phil to believe his assurance that no old women in peaked hats and grinning dwarfs ever hid in the corner of his little girl's room, and for a long time this conversation comforted her. 'Father says you are not there,' she would say quite loudly; 'I won't believe in you, Mother Peak, any more.' But, alas! one day a curdling laugh answered her. How was poor Philippa to know it was only one of the servants outside her door, and that night she smothered her head again under the clothes.

Mr. Nugent had spoken both to his mother-in-law, and also to Marthe, on the subject of the child's nervousness. 'Marthe must leave the door of the night-nursery open, or else there must be a candle in Philippa's room,' he had said very firmly; but Madame Mercier only shrugged her shoulders at this; she never openly contradicted her son-in-law, but there was no candle lighted, and after the second night Marthe closed the door as usual, and the reign of Mother Peak began again.

'Mr. Nugent often troubled himself over the child's lack of animation and spirit, but he had no idea of the petty tyranny that was sapping the roots of her childish life and robbing it of all joy. Phil had no playfellows. When invitations came from the other masters' wives who had little girls of her age, Madame Mercier would refuse them very stiffly and decidedly.

'Philippa was too young to pay visits,' she would say, 'and her own nerves would not allow her to bear any noise. My granddaughter wants for nothing,' she would continue; 'she has her nursery and toys and her *bonne*, and by and by she will have her governess.' But when one kind woman sent a snow-white kitten to Mr. Nugent's little girl, Madame Mercier, who detested cats, insisted that it should be sent back, and Philippa had wept bitter tears of disappointment.

'It was such a darling,' she sobbed, 'and it had a blue ribbon round its neck, and I would have loved it so.'

'I will have no cat in the house,' returned her grandmother in her cold, repressive voice. 'I am ashamed of you, Philippa, making all this fuss; take your skipping-rope and go into the garden directly, and let me hear no more of this.' But as the poor child

performed her dreary exercises, she literally watered the garden paths with her tears.

'My dolls cannot love me,' she said afterwards to her father, 'but a kitten could love me back,' and her distress had been so poignant that Mr. Nugent thought for a moment that he would bring back the kitten; but he reflected that it would only be dooming the little animal to certain misery, and it was then that the thought of a pony crossed his mind.

He was revolving Mrs. Thurston's speech to him as he and Philippa walked towards the Old House. Her manner had said more than her words; she thought the child had looked dull. Well, Marthe was certainly not much of a playfellow—a phlegmatic Belgian peasant, whose heavy face revealed a hard nature. He had never cared for the girl, but Madame Mercier was always voluble in her praises. Marthe was a treasure; she told the truth and carried out orders; she was as steady as the cathedral clock; the nurseries were patterns of neatness; nothing was ever out of order; Philippa was kept in excellent discipline; she was taught obedience and self-restraint; there was no foolish spoiling, and for the moment Mr. Nugent had wondered whether this bracing atmosphere might be too severe for his tender little flower; but he was too ignorant on the subject of girl nature to trust his own opinion.

'I wonder what Mrs. Thurston would think,' he said to himself; but at this point Philippa tugged at his hand; she was unable to bear the silence any longer.

'Father, did you not like talking to that nice lady?' she asked in a trembling voice. The question seemed to surprise him.

'Why yes, Phil,' he said lightly; 'I like talking to

all nice ladies'; but this generalisation did not seem to please Phil; it was far too frivolous an answer.

'Oh, but she is ever so much nicer than other people,' she said gravely. 'I think her quite the prettiest and kindest person I have ever seen. It is her eyes that are so kind,' went on Phil. 'When I am a woman I should love to be like Mrs. Thurston.'

'Not like your own dear mother, Phil?' he asked in rather a constrained voice, that made Phil peep at him wistfully from under her shady hat.

'Oh, I shall never be like mother,' she returned quickly. 'Gran has said so again and again. The other day she told me that mother was good and beautiful and her only comfort, but that I always give her trouble.'

'Is that true, Phil?'

'Gran said it,' repeated the child earnestly. 'I try to be good, father—I do try so hard, but she never seems quite pleased with me. I wonder why Gran does not love little girls. Do you know, father?'

'My dear child, what has put such an idea in your head? Gran is old, and not strong, but I am quite sure that she is very fond of you'; but to his surprise Phil shook her head.

'I daresay she loved mother when she was a little girl, but she was strict even with her. Gran told me so herself. She does not hold with spoiling children. If she had loved me she would have let me keep the kitten'—for this kitten episode was the last straw that had broken Phil's poor little back. Then a sudden impulse came to Mr. Nugent; he would tell her about the pony; the anticipation would be more delightful even than the surprise, and she would soon forget her disappointment about the kitten.

Phil seemed unable to take in the news at first.

'Say it again,' she whispered breathlessly; and when at last her little brains grasped the wonderful intelligence, she turned as white as a sheet with sheer excitement and pleasure.

'For me! do you really mean it? a real live pony for me,' she gasped, and then Mr. Nugent laughed.

'And why not for you, my girlie? There is lots of room in the stable, and Stevenson will look after her,'—Stevenson was the gardener at the Old House,—'and his boy Tom could walk beside you.'

'Will Marthe let me go by myself quite fast?' asked Phil, with her eyes shining with eagerness, 'and may I give her sugar my own self?' and then her face suddenly clouded. 'Oh, what shall I do? Gran never lets me have sugar or sweets, and poor Ladybird will be so disappointed.' But Mr. Nugent satisfied her on this point. A stock of sugar and other equine dainties should be laid in, and kept in a certain cupboard in the library; but when Phil's mind was relieved on this subject another thought occurred to her.

'Won't Mrs. Thurston's little boy be dreadfully sorry to part with the pony, father?' Then Mr. Nugent had to confess that he had quite forgotten Ladybird's young master.

'You see they cannot help themselves, Phil,' he explained. 'The poor boy has just lost his father, and his mother is not rich; and Mr. Lloyd tells me that they are going into quite a small house, so they are obliged to part with all their horses.'

'Oh, how dreadful to be poor and part with all one's pets!' and Phil's eyes were full of tears.

'Father, I do feel so sorry for that poor boy. Won't

you tell him that he may have a ride sometimes, and that I won't mind a bit? I should love for him to do it.'

'That's a kind little woman,' returned her father, secretly touched by this generosity. 'Don't look so sad about it, Phil; I will have a talk with Ronald and see what can be done.'

'And Gran won't mind.'

'Gran won't know anything about it; it will be a secret between you and me and Ronald, and, well, perhaps we must take Stevenson into confidence.'

'Stevenson is a nice man,' remarked Phil gravely. 'He gave me a big brown pear one day, and he has promised me a little garden of my own; but I don't think Gran will let me have it, because Marthe tells her that I mess my frock when I dig.' Then Mr. Nugent frowned. He had expressly desired that a little plot of ground should be set apart for the child, with some hardy plants that would be likely to thrive. He had even marked out the ground with Stevenson, and had had it weeded and dug over, and now Marthe's intolerable love of tidiness had frustrated his plan. He determined to put his foot down for once and assert his authority. He would go into the town the next day and buy a set of small gardening implements and a watering-pot, and he would tell his mother-in-law that the garden was part of his plan of education. He was already beginning to teach Phil botany, and he knew the love of nature and the study of plant life could not be begun too early. They had reached the gate by this time, and he dismissed her with a hasty kiss, and the child with usual obedience ran into the house, only pausing to kiss her hand to him on the threshold.

The Old House stood far back from the road, and the carriage drive, planted thickly with dark shrubs and trees, gave it a retired look.

Mr. Nugent had been attracted by the picturesque oak-panelled rooms, although Madame Mercier had complained bitterly of their low ceilings and dulness. To appease her constant grumbling he had consented to have the drawing-room modernised by a bow window and French satin paper; and here Madame Mercier spent her days, absolutely refusing to use any other sitting-room, and surrounded by Japanese screens and *marqueterie* cabinets and all the thousand gimcrack bagatelles and Parisian toys in which her soul delighted.

Her bedroom was over it, and these two rooms formed her little world; she never crossed the threshold of her son-in-law's library, and her daily inspection of the nursery was considered in the light of an irksome duty.

The library was at the back of the house, and overlooked the garden. It was a beautiful room, with a finely carved oak mantelpiece; a low range of bookshelves occupied two sides of the room, and the mellow, subdued tints of the calf and vellum bindings harmonised grandly with the oak panelling.

At the side of the house, and quite hidden from view by a privet hedge, was a low iron building; this was Mr. Nugent's laboratory where he made experiments. In one room he kept his fossils and fine collection of butterflies and dried plants, and in a third room he stuffed any rare bird that had fallen to his gun, or instructed the most intelligent of his pupils in the various mysteries belonging to this special craft.

Next to the library the hall was the chief feature of

the house. It had been used as a billiard room by the previous owner, but Mr. Nugent, who had no taste for games, had simply placed some of his finest cabinets of butterflies and fossils there, and had filled up the remaining wall space with book-shelves; an oak settle by the fire-place and a tiger skin brought from India were the only attempts at furniture. The tiger skin was one of Phil's chief bogies. On winter afternoons the red fire-lights brought the glassy eyes and terrible fangs into strong relief. Phil used to shut her eyes and grasp the banisters tightly as she came down the staircase. Once she lost her footing and rolled over and over to the bottom. The noise brought out Madame Mercier. Phil felt dizzy and bruised, but she bravely choked back her tears.

'I have not hurt myself much, Gran,' she gasped, 'but I just slipped.'

'People who fall downstairs deserve to hurt themselves,' returned Madame Mercier severely. 'You are too old to be such a baby, Philippa,' and then she went back to the room, while the poor child picked herself up and followed.

Phil would rather have died than have owned her terror of the tiger, but it haunted her dreams, and the striped tawny creature became a favourite nightmare, and with Mother Peak and the grinning dwarf formed a triple alliance of horror.

Ah! how little grown-up people make allowance for the foolish fancies of childhood. Children dread ridicule, and the fear of provoking it keeps them silent on the subject of their terrors.

How is a child to confess even to her mother that a big black bear pursues her when she goes upstairs in the dark. Her mother would only laugh at that absurd

notion. Then there is that dreadful something under her bed—not a burglar. A child's mind does not grasp any actual tangible fear ; it is always shadowy, unreal, and unsubstantial ; something, somebody, vague, mysterious, and altogether terrifying, like the crouching glassy-eyed cat that was Phil's abhorrence.

CHAPTER XIV

MADAME MÈRE

'Whatever new discoveries have been made in the region of self-love, there remain many unexplored territories there.'—LA ROCHEFOUCAULD.

'It is time to fear when tyrants seem to hiss.'—PERICLES.

MR. NUGENT was just crossing the large inner hall when a sudden thought made him retrace his steps. He was later than usual, and Madame Mercier would be probably waiting for him to join her at the tea-table.

Although it was October the afternoon was warm. Nevertheless, a large wood fire was burning in the drawing-room grate, and Madame Mercier sat beside it in her softly cushioned chair with her Japanese screen drawn round her to keep off draughts.

There was a faint, subtle fragrance pervading the atmosphere which was peculiarly distasteful to his olfactory nerves; a suggestion of oriental perfume always scented the room that Madame Mercier inhabited. He had once told her, with masculine impatience, 'that she created her own atmosphere. It is as enervating and sensuous as an Eastern harem,' he had said in a remonstrative voice, and Madame Mercier had never forgiven him this speech. 'It was ungentlemanly; it was brutal,' she said to herself; 'why should

he begrudge her her little pleasures.' Sweet scents were a joy to her; she loved to steep herself in sandalwood and attar of rose; every drawer and box in her bedroom was pervaded with some faint oriental perfume.

'Have you had your tea, Madame Mère,' he asked as he walked briskly into the room, and then Madame Mercier put down her book.

'I had it an hour ago,' she said in rather a chilling voice. 'What makes you so late, Marmaduke?' When Madame Mercier was displeased she always called him Marmaduke; on other occasions he was Duke. 'Marthe had been down to the door twice to look for Philippa.'

'It was a fine evening, and I suppose we lingered,' he returned carelessly. 'As you have not kept tea for me, I will have a cup in the library.'

'Which no doubt you will greatly prefer,' returned Madame Mercier. She spoke with decided acerbity. Her temper was always uncertain on Sundays. An English Sunday affected her nerves she would say. 'It does not please *le bon Dieu* that we should wear sackcloth inside and out one day in every week,' she would remark; but it must be owned that Madame Mercier's notion of sackcloth was somewhat vague, for she dressed daintily and fared sumptuously every day of her life. In her youth Madame had been a beauty and a coquette, and now, though she was past sixty, she still thought the rôle suited her, and had no doubt of her own powers of fascination.

When Ronald told his mother that Madame Mercier was like a little white cat he was not far from the truth; and indeed the sallow smooth face, without a line or wrinkle, the cold bluish grey eyes, hard as steel, and the fluffy picturesque white hair, made up a very striking personality. Her dress, too, was somewhat

peculiar, whatever the time of day might be her throat was always swathed in fine cobweb lace, and deep ruffles of the same garnished her wrists. Sometimes in winter this would be replaced by white fur. Her pale-coloured tea-gowns were generally of rich material, and the boys who breakfasted at the Old House were wont to call her among themselves Madame Blanche-Chatte, Mother Frills, or the Queen of Sheba.

'When I look at her hands,' observed one young wag, 'I always feel inclined to quote Dr. Watts, and say, "Twinkle, twinkle, pretty star." My word, she has rings on her fingers, and no mistake, and I should not be surprised if she had bells on her toes too.'

Mr. Nugent stood on the rug for a moment regarding her, and wondering what he should say next. Their conversation was at all times rather limited, but occasionally, when she was in a good humour, Madame could be amusing enough, and the magic word 'Paris' would at once start her off on a hundred anecdotes and reminiscences connected with her past life.

Madame Mercier thought she was doing her duty nobly in coming to England to take care of her son-in-law's house, and of his motherless child.

She always spoke on this subject with a modest sense of her own virtue and with the air of a martyr. 'Not many mothers-in-law would have acted as I have done,' she would remark to her cronies, 'but for the sake of my lost Louise I voluntarily sought exile. I detest England, and English people are not to my taste. Ah! I know what you would say'—with a charming little flirt of her fan,—'that I am only a naturalised Frenchwoman; but it is the land of my adoption, and the grave of my dear Mercier—and France, *la belle France*,—

is written on my heart.' This was said with tender vivacity; then Madame Mercier's voice became still more pathetic: 'When my dear angel left me, she implored me with her dying breath to be good to her poor Duke and her little helpless babe, and what could I do but promise to remain with them—never for a single week have I been absent from my post. Sorely as Duke has tried me, sadly as we have differed, I have remembered my dear child, and striven to be patient, but our natures are alien, and he is for ever thwarting me. But I have my way with the child; he dares not interfere with me there.'

'Few women would have been so noble,' her friends would reply, for Madame Mercier was extremely popular; many people credited her with all the domestic virtues, and held her up as a pattern of female excellence. They accepted her plea of ill health, and never put down her inactivity to indolence and dislike of exertion. 'Madame Mercier was such a splendid disciplinarian,' they would say; 'no child could be more docile and better behaved than little Philippa. Madame's devotion to her grandchild was quite touching. "If the dear child ails anything, I never close my eyes the whole night," that is what she said to us the other day.' The truth being that nothing ever interfered with Madame Mercier's repose.

Marmaduke Nugent could have told quite another version that would have somewhat tarnished this account of womanly self-sacrifice and devotion.

Madame Mercier would never have given up her comfortable flat in Paris, to keep his house and look after Philippa, but for the loss of her income.

The bad news had reached her as she watched by her daughter's deathbed. 'You will be good to my husband

and my baby,' Louise had murmured, but it is more than doubtful whether the idea of her mother living with them ever entered her head.

Mr. Nugent was too much stunned at first by his wife's loss to realise exactly what was happening under his roof. Madame had chosen her rooms and was already enacting the rôle of mistress of the house before he woke to the fact that the reign of Madame Mère had begun. Before long he knew that, like Sinbad, he was saddled with his Old Man of the Sea, and that without sheer force and brutality there would be no getting rid of her.

Marmaduke Nugent had a man's horror of quarrelling with a woman; besides, she was his Louise's mother, and she was poor, and though there was no real love between them, and never had been, she had made herself useful to him in many ways. Latterly he had doubted her wisdom in dealing with Philippa. He had grown afraid that there was too much severity and too little tenderness displayed. The child had grown strangely timid, and he was afraid that her health suffered. He had spoken on the subject privately to Dr. Franklin, and the doctor's answer had been conclusive.

'There is nothing the matter with her,' he said curtly; 'but she is growing, and she has got a nervous excitable temperament. She wants rousing. Get her amongst other children, let her play more, and burn the lesson book.' But Madame Mercier had been extremely indignant when this opinion was repeated to her.

'My dear Marmaduke,' she said icily, 'I understood there was to be no interference with my treatment of Philippa. I have brought up my own child, and am certainly more experienced than you are.

Philippa does very few lessons, and she learns them under my own eye.' Madame Mercier did not add that the process was facilitated by much rapping of poor little knuckles. 'In the afternoon she goes out with Marthe or plays in the garden. She has plenty of air and exercise.' Indeed Madame Mercier became so eloquent and discursive on the subject of her own admirable methods, that her son-in-law was fairly beaten from the field.

As he stood on the rug that Sunday afternoon he wondered whether he should renew the old argument, then he made up his mind that he would only tell her about the pony. Ladybird would arrive in a day or two, and he knew the news must be broken to her.

She listened with closed lips as he told his story, but he could see she was excessively displeased.

Madame Mercier had two standing grievances with her son-in-law; one was when he gave up his house in South Kensington to take the post of Natural Science Master in Wycombe, and the other when he refused to give her a carriage for her exclusive use.

'He could not afford it,' he said curtly, but Madame Mercier, who knew the extent of his income, was not to be put off with this excuse. To do her justice, she made far less of this grievance than of the first one.

The idea of Marmaduke breaking up his comfortable and well-appointed home at South Kensington, and voluntarily putting himself into harness, seemed utterly preposterous to her, and filled her with a deep sense of humiliation.

It was in vain that he explained his reasons to her most patiently and fully; she simply shrugged her shoulders with a disdainful air,—it was just one of his cranks; how was any sane, well-balanced mind to com-

prehend such Quixotic foolishness ; he had to give up all hope at last of bringing her round to his opinions.

After all, how was she to understand him, when he could hardly understand himself. Marmaduke Nugent was not like other men, and his life had not been free from trials. He had loved his wife dearly ; nevertheless his marriage had not been a success, and in his case, too, apples of Sodom had been offered to allay his thirst. He was a lonely man, and had always been lonely ; and an idle life was not to his taste. He wanted work, interests, and intercourse with kindred minds, and when his old friend Hardcastle was appointed headmaster of Wycombe, the idea came to him to offer his services temporarily as science master. He did it merely to help his old friend out of a difficulty ; but to his own surprise, the work just suited him, and the attractions of the old city drew him like a magnet. For the first time in his life he felt tolerably content. The work was never too hard ; he had time to carry on his own studies ; and the society of the other masters was congenial to him. One day he went over the Old House, and decided to take it and remain permanently at Wycombe. 'A man must have something to interest him,' he said, when some acquaintance remonstrated with him. 'I always knew teaching was my vocation. Of course there is no need for me to work, but that only adds to the zest of the thing, and gives me a chance of being useful.'

Mr. Nugent was well aware why Madame Mercier so resented the idea of a pony for Philippa ; but he had no intention of pandering to her love of luxury.

'The pony will give us no trouble,' he went on in an off-hand manner. 'Stephenson has plenty of time to look after her, and he understands groom's work ;

and Tom is a steady lad, and can be trusted to lead her. If you wish it, Marthe can go too.'

'Decidedly, Marthe will accompany her,' returned Madame Mercier in a hard metallic voice. 'Philippa goes nowhere without her *bonne*.'

'Very well, then, we understand each other, Madame Mère. Every day, when the weather is fine, Philippa is to have her ride.'

'When her lessons are well done, and she deserves the treat,' interposed Madame dryly.

'Pardon me, it is no question of good conduct or reward; the daily ride is for Philippa's health, and I should wish this treatment carried out.' Mr. Nugent spoke more curtly than usual, but his mother-in-law's manner did not please him—she was beginning to raise difficulties.

'And there is another matter I must mention,' he went on. 'I find Phil has never been put in possession of the little plot of ground I marked off for her garden. Is this so, Madame Mère?'

'Yes,' she returned coolly. 'Marthe complained to me of the state Philippa got in, and I was obliged to forbid her digging any more.' Mr. Nugent's brow grew dark, but he tried to control himself.

'Forgive me if I say that it was not right to contradict my orders. Marthe is only a servant, and has nothing to do with it; if Philippa makes herself untidy, she can surely have a clean pinafore. I wish her to have a garden of her own,' he continued, 'and to learn to cultivate flowers. It is too late in the season to trouble about it now; but next spring I shall buy her gardening tools, and I shall expect her to use them.'

'Have you any other commands to lay upon me,

Marmaduke,' asked Madame Mercier, in rather an unpleasant voice, 'for I warn you I am getting tired.' Then Mr. Nugent muttered something under his breath, and walked away. As usual she had contrived to irritate and exasperate him, and, worst of all, he could not be sure that she would not set herself to thwart him. As he sat in his easy-chair and drank his tea, his thoughts were hardly peaceful, and for the hundredth time, he wondered how he could have been weak enough to allow himself to be saddled by his mother-in-law. On the table near him was a beautiful painting of a dark-eyed girl with a sweet pensive face. She wore a white gown, and had some violets at her throat. The artist had done his work well, and had conveyed the half-veiled melancholy in her expression. It was not a strong face, though it was decidedly attractive, the mouth showing irresolution ; but it was a very lovable one. It was the portrait of Louise Mercier, and had been taken during the weeks preceding her marriage, and had been her first gift to her English husband.

Marmaduke Nugent had passed some months in Paris in order to prosecute his favourite studies, and one of his fellow-students had introduced him to Madame Mercier and her daughter. They were living in a luxuriously furnished flat, and Madame Mercier's salon on Tuesdays and Thursdays were always attended by the best people. She had also little dinners and *petit soupers*, to which she asked only her most intimate friends. Unfortunately for his own peace of mind, Mr. Nugent soon became an habituè of the salon, and Louise's pathetic eyes and gentle manners soon took his heart by storm.

The mother and daughter seemed absolutely de-

voted to each other—the most endearing terms were always on Madame's lips, the fondest caresses were lavished on the young girl. 'My little one is never out of my sight,' she would say; 'night and day I keep her near me. We have no thoughts separate, my Louise and I.'

It was natural that Marmaduke Nugent should think this beautiful; it appealed to his English instinct. A daughter so loving, he thought, would surely make a devoted wife. How was he to guess that a pliant, weak nature like Louise's could be crushed out of all individuality; that Madame Mercier's strong will and arbitrary temper should have so drilled and ruled and domineered over her daughter that Louise dare not assert her will.

Even during their engagement nothing undeceived him. Louise bore her character of fiancée with the utmost grace; she always met him with a smile, and accepted his gifts with pretty expressions of gratitude; and although she was very shy with him, more so than most girls in her position, he attributed her slight shrinking to natural timidity.

'The dear child depends too much on me,' Madame Mercier would say; 'she is as retiring and modest as a little violet. *Ma cherie*,' she observed once, 'Duke is complaining that you are too quiet with him—that you seem afraid of him; that must not be, my daughter; we must not grieve our good Duke like that.'

'You are making too much of it, Madame,' observed Marmaduke, vexed that he had been the means of exposing his young fiancée to a maternal lecture; he would have been still more so if he had seen the severe look in Madame Mercier's eyes.

'I did not mean to be quiet, Duke,' returned poor Louise, stammering and flushing nervously: 'my head ached, that was why I was not amusing.'

'Air and exercise are good for headaches,' returned Madame Mercier serenely. She had small pity for ailments. 'Marmaduke has come to fetch you for a walk, English fashion; you may go with him'; and Louise retired to put on her hat.

It may be doubted whether either of them enjoyed the walk. Louise seemed utterly unnerved, and scarcely able to restrain her tears. 'It is nothing; it is only that my head aches,' she said, 'and it grieves me that you find me stupid.'

Of course Marmaduke negatived this preposterous assertion: his little sweetheart was never stupid; she was tired, out of sorts. They would turn back; the balcony would be far cooler. But Louise had seemed quite shocked at this suggestion.

'Oh no, no, please let me go on. I would much, much rather be here with you.' And then she faltered out, with difficulty: 'When you are not pleased with me, Duke; when I disappoint you, will you tell me so? and I will try and alter; but when you speak to mother, as you did just now, it worries her so.'

'Why, my dearest,' exclaimed Marmaduke, rather astonished at this unexpected reproach from his dove-like Louise, 'I said absolutely nothing to your mother, except that you seemed to me a little out of spirits.'

'Yes, I know, and it was only your kindness; but, Duke, if you love me, do not say that again to mother, and I will be gay, oh yes, I will be as gay as one of your English larks,'—but here the poor girl burst into tears. But even then Marmaduke never guessed that any esoteric meaning lay under his fiancée's words.

CHAPTER XV

APPLES OF SODOM

'No man wants iron-soled shoes for a soft meadow. . . . No one can live nobly and worthily without struggle, battle, self-denial. We shall need our iron shoes.'—Rev. J. R. MILLER.

'O'er every feature of that still, pale face,
Had sorrow fix'd what time could ne'er erase.'—BYRON.

LOOKING back at those days, Marmaduke Nugent often marvelled at his own blindness; how could he have fooled himself with the belief that Louise's gentle indifference and passive endurance of his impetuous wooing were only the soft veiling of her maidenly love. The idea that any undue pressure had been put upon her, that in accepting his devotion she was acting under the constraint of a strong will, never entered his head; and when the wedding day arrived, he had taken his place before the altar with a heart full of the truest worship and reverence to the pale girl who stood so statue-like beside him.

It was some time before the awakening came.

Three months had passed since their marriage, but they had not left France. A friend of Mr. Nugent's had lent them his country-house, a charming chateau on the banks of the Loire; a small yacht was also

placed at their disposal. For a time the change seemed to benefit Louise. She seemed less pale and drooping. Once or twice he had detected her in tears, but she always pleaded a headache as an excuse, and he knew too little about women to guess that this was a mere evasion.

But he was almost pained at her intense anxiety to please him. If she had been trying to atone to him for some wrong she had done him she could not have been more solicitous to win his approval. Once, when she was doing some little womanly service for him, he caught her hand as she passed him and kissed it with lover-like passion. 'Dearest, you must not spoil me,' he said; 'it is for me to wait on you.' But she shook her head with a faint sweet smile—Louise never laughed; he remembered long afterwards that he had never heard her laugh.

'Oh no, Duke,' she said softly; 'my mother says that English wives always wait on their husbands, and I want to be a good English wife, for you are so kind—so kind.' And then she leant against him with a little sob, and he had praised and petted her.

One sultry night a storm was brewing, and the stillness and oppression of the atmosphere made him unusually restless. Louise had been a little feverish that day, and had once or twice complained of faintness; but when he entered her room he found that she had sunk into an uneasy slumber. As he stood watching her she turned upon her side with a sort of groan, and her long dark hair flowed over the pillow. 'Lèon,' she murmured drowsily, 'it is impossible. My mother will not have it. She is terrible—terrible—and I have fear. Ah!' as Marmaduke tried to awaken her from what he imagined to be an uneasy dream, 'Ah! will

you kill me too with your doubts? You know I love you, Lèon—you, and you only, my beloved'; and then the indistinct mutterings went on.

Marmaduke almost staggered from the room. In spite of the sultry heat his teeth were chattering. As he reached the library and unbarred the heavy shutters the first clap of thunder broke over the chateau; but the storm without was less vivid to him than the storm within. But from her own lips, he would never have believed it—that she, his bride, his gentle pure-minded Louise should love, not him, her husband, but another man, was simply horrible.

Again he heard the drowsy mutterings, and then the agitated and half delirious whisper, 'You know I love you, Lèon—you, and you only, my beloved.' Good Heavens! who could this Lèon be?

He sat down beside the window, and the blue sheets of lightning played round his head. Every now and then the heavens seemed opened, and the dazzling light illumined the garden and the dark river flowing below it, with the little yacht anchored by the terrace steps. He was racking his brain to try and remember if he had ever heard the name. Then a sudden recollection came to him with the swiftness of a flash of lightning. It was one of the Thursday receptions, and he had been specially invited; and although a comparative stranger, Madame Mercier had received him with unusual graciousness. He remembered that, as he entered the room, he saw a handsome young officer, in the uniform of a Zouave, talking rather earnestly to Mademoiselle Mercier. Louise's face was flushed, and she looked unusually animated. She was in white, he remembered, with some Gloire de Dijon roses in her belt. He had never seen her look more lovely. A passing feeling of

envy made him ask the name of the young officer. 'Lèon de Tourville,' was the answer; 'he is the handsomest and most impecunious officer in the French army; but he is *bon garcon* for all that, and women, old and young, lose their hearts to him—even Madame, there'; and the young Frenchman pointed out to Mr. Nugent, Madame Mercier's beaming face, as the officer approached her. This, then, must be the Lèon who was troubling his wife's repose. But yet, since that evening he had never again crossed his path. What had become of him? If the earth had opened and swallowed him up he could not have disappeared more utterly. Why had his name never been mentioned by either mother or daughter? What was he to deduce from such silence? Had Madame Mercier first encouraged the young man's attachment to her daughter, and then discarded him ruthlessly for a richer suitor? Could any woman calling herself a mother so trample on an innocent girl's affections? And yet it might be so! There was a fierce battle raging in Marmaduke Nugent's breast that night, and though he came forth victor, he never lost the scars of that miserable warfare. Disappointment and outraged affections, the bitter consciousness that two women had fooled him, and that his own weak credulity had suffered him to be deceived—all these stabs and thrusts were wounding him by turns. Louise—his Louise, his wedded wife—had no heart to give him. When she had sworn to love him there had been a lie on her lips.

It was well that he was alone, and that the night was before him. Never in all the days of his manhood had he ever suffered so terribly. He understood during those hours how, in savage and undisciplined natures, jealousy and rage make even murder possible. That

night, for one instant, it did not seem such a strange thing that Othello should kill the gentle, loving Desdemona ; but before morning he came to a better frame of mind.

She had not meant to wrong him ; but she was weak, and circumstances had been too strong for her. If any one was to blame it was her mother, not Louise.

She had been forced to give up her lover and to marry him, and the effort to do her duty, and the sadness of her renunciation, had nearly broken her heart. If he had but known—ah ! merciful Heaven, if he had but known !—he would have given her back her freedom and said no word of reproach, like an English gentleman.

And now !—there was nothing to be done. She was his wife until death them did part, and it was not for him to shame her and rob her of her peace by betraying his knowledge of her secret. How would it serve him to tell her to her face that she had lied to him, and that Lèon de Tourville ought rightly to be her husband ? His reproaches would only scare her and drive her farther from him. No, in spite of his anger and pain he pitied her too much to wish to add to her burden. He would take his apples of Sodom without murmuring, and return her good for evil. At least, whatever she suffered, she should still find rest and peace near him. He would watch over her and be good to her, and perhaps in time she would forget this Lèon, and he would win her confidence and her love.

It was a noble resolution, and spoke of a high nature. And when the day broke, and when Marmaduke Nugent walked out to breathe the freshness of the morning air, though his face was still drawn and haggard, and he looked on a wrecked garden, destroyed

and robbed of its beauty by the pitiless storm, there was something like peace in his heart—the peace of conquest won, and self trampled under foot,—and passionate pity and full forgiveness for the beloved object who was no longer his soul's idol, for he too had seen the feet of clay. After this night the chateau became odious to him, and in another week or two Mr. Nugent took his wife to England; but to Madame Mercier's surprise they did not pass through Paris, and it was not until Philippa was born that she saw her daughter again. After the birth of her child Louise's health became very unsatisfactory; her spirits failed, and she seemed to fade visibly, but no one but her husband ever guessed the cause.

A few weeks before their child was born he had found her lying on the couch in a dead faint, with a French paper in her hand. He had had some difficulty in removing it from her grasp before he summoned help, and as soon as she had recovered consciousness he left her with the nurse, and retired to his study. He must know the cause of the shock,—there, on the first page, he saw the death of Lèon de Tourville, from the result of an accident, at Algiers.

'She has had a shock,' he said briefly to the doctor, but the sternness of his face had forbidden any questioning.

His rival was dead—perhaps, who knows, when her first grief was over, Louise would come to the father of her child for comfort—the little one would draw them together; but alas, these hopes were doomed to be frustrated. Before long he could not shut his eyes to the fact that she was slowly fading out of life, and even the sight of her babe could win no smile from her lips.

'Why is she like me?' she would say. 'Duke would rather have had a boy. What will he do with my poor little girl,' and her tears would wet the infant's face, until her mother would snatch it away.

'It is unlucky to cry over a baby,' she said once. 'I told you so before, Louise. You must not allow yourself to be overcome by your nerves; you must think of your husband and the child, and brace yourself. You let yourself go, and make no effort'; but the dying woman—she was scarcely more than a girl—looked at her strangely—

'One cannot live with a broken heart, mother,' she murmured, in a dull inward voice.

'What!' and Madame Mercier's face grew livid; 'do you mean to tell me to my face that you have not forgotten that foolish boy Lèon. Louise, I did my duty by you, I acted like a true mother. If I had suffered you to marry Lèon, you would have starved. No—no, I did better, I gave you to a good husband, who loved you truly'; but as Madame Mercier spoke, she could not encounter her daughter's eyes.

'When you separated me from Lèon, you signed my death warrant,' returned Louise—in the presence of death she feared her tyrant no longer. 'Mother, why were you so cruel? I pray God that I may be able to forgive you before I die,' and then she turned her face to the wall, and Madame Mercier crept from the room.

For the first time in her life the hard worldly woman felt something like remorse. She had murdered her daughter's happiness, and now the victim of her caprice and tyranny was dying, because she had no wish to live. Madame Mercier had a nervous attack, and kept her room the remainder of the day.

That evening, as Marmaduke Nugent was sitting

beside his wife's bed, Louise, who had been dozing, suddenly opened her eyes.

'Duke,' she said tremulously, 'I think I am weaker, and it will not be long now; but before I leave you I want to thank you for all your goodness to me'; then she took his hand and kissed it. 'Dear, you have been so good and patient—ah, if I had only known you before we went to Paris.'

'Would you have loved me if we had met then?' he asked with uncontrollable bitterness in his voice. But she misunderstood him. How could she guess that he was the possessor of her secret; her husband's noble heart was a sealed book to her.

'I always loved you, Duke,' she returned tenderly, 'but I was never worthy to be your wife'; and then she crept closer to him, and laid her head on his shoulder.

Poor unhappy Louise, all her short married life she had been torn between conflicting feelings: her overmastering love for her brave young soldier-lover, and her reverence and gratitude for her husband's cherishing care. But for the shock of Lèon's sudden death the birth of her child might have given her fresh interests in life, but she never recovered the blow.

Mr. Nugent was alone with his wife when she died, and no one knew what passed between them. When Madame Mercier read the simple epitaph that Marmaduke had had inscribed, she shrugged her shoulders, as though in disapproval—

TO THE MEMORY OF LOUISE AGATHA NUGENT, THE BELOVED WIFE OF MARMADUKE NUGENT, AGED ONE-AND-TWENTY.

'Weeping shall endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.'

'It was inexplicable,' Madame Mercier said, but she shuddered slightly as she spoke; strange to say, she never revisited her daughter's grave. Marmaduke once took Philippa there, the child spelt over the words curiously, and then looked up in her father's face.

'Was my dear mother so unhappy?' she asked. 'I do not understand, father.'

'There is not much that I can tell you, Phil,' he answered sorrowfully, 'she was good and sweet, but she was often very sad. I think the angels knew it and came to fetch her, because they longed so to wipe away her tears.'

'And she is happy now?' asked the child wistfully.

'Yes, she is happy now,' but his voice choked a little. His Louise was safe in the heavenly haven. It was only he who remained lonely and sad, to be tossed and buffeted by the waves of this troublesome world. But not even for his sake would he bring her back. All this was ancient history—the record of his short, unsatisfying married life. But as he sat that Sunday afternoon looking at her picture he told himself, as he had done a hundred times before, that he thanked God that his dear one had died in her early womanhood.

'She was not strong enough for life,' he said to himself. 'She was too easily crushed by circumstance and the will of others. She could not fight. She could only suffer and die.'

And then by some strange transition of thought he wondered how Mrs. Thurston would have acted under such circumstances; but even as he asked the question he smiled, as he remembered the steady glance of her eyes and the firmly closed lips, that spoke of a strong will.

'She is the sort of woman who would provide herself with iron shoes for rough roads,' he said to himself, 'but my poor Louise went barefoot and bleeding over the cruel stones,' and then again he marvelled that Canon Thurston should have won such a wife for himself. 'Perhaps I misjudged him,' he went on, 'it is not fair to take a man's measure after a single interview. But he struck me as a worldly-minded ecclesiastic, with mediocre talents and a good deal of self-sufficiency. But I must have wronged him. Mrs. Thurston would hardly have married that sort of man.' The subject puzzled him. It was one of those enigmas that one perpetually meets in life, and for which it is so difficult to give an answer.

He had only seen Valerie Thurston twice, but each time he had been impressed by her strong individuality, and the latent sadness in her face had only seemed natural under the circumstances.

'Yes, decidedly, Mrs. Thurston has iron shoes for rough roads,' he said to himself, for he had been much pleased with this quaint illustration, that seemed to him very apt and full of meaning. And then Marmaduke Nugent got up from his chair and pulled himself together as the gong sounded for the evening meal, but some lingering feeling of tenderness made him go up to the night-nursery to kiss Phil in her little white bed. He found her wide awake, and less nervous than usual. The idea of Ladybird had banished Mother Peak and Co. for that night at least.

CHAPTER XVI

RIVAL CLAIMANTS

'What is Life, father?
A battle, my child,
When the foes gather on every hand
And rest not day and night,
And the feeble little ones stand
In the thickest of the fight.'

ADELAIDE ANNE PROCTOR.

WHEN Philippa was told that her new pet had arrived, her joy and excitement were unbounded. Mr. Nugent found her with her face glued to the nursery window and her toys lying unheeded round her. She jumped off the window-seat with an exclamation when she caught sight of him.

'Oh, father, have you come to fetch me?' she cried eagerly. Then he smiled and took her hand. He could hear Marthe grumbling to herself as she swept the toys into a basket.

Ladybird received her little mistress with her usual skittishness. She backed away from them and pranced on her hind legs, but to Mr. Nugent's surprise Philippa, who was generally so timid, did not show the slightest fear. She patted her glossy neck and kissed her on the nose. 'Look father,' she cried delightedly, 'Ladybird

kisses me back'; but the pony was only sniffing at the carrots that the little girl carried in her hand. It was with difficulty that Mr. Nugent could induce Philippa to tear herself away from her new toy, but a promise that he would take her himself for her first ride that very afternoon made her completely happy. But alas, 'the best laid schemes o' mice and men gang aft a-gley,' and when at the appointed hour Mr. Nugent left his laboratory and called for Philippa a woebegone little figure appeared at the head of the staircase. To his surprise and displeasure Phil was still in her nursery pinafore—a holland garment that completely enveloped her—and her eyes were swollen with crying. The poor child could hardly speak for tears.

'Gran says I must not have my ride,' she sobbed. 'But, father, I did try to learn my lesson, but it was so hard——' But before Phil could get out her piteous little tale Madame's velvet slippers came padding softly round the corner.

'Philippa, go back to the nursery,' she said severely; 'no work no play, that is my rule. The child has been idle, Duke,' she continued smoothly, 'she is incorrigibly careless. I am quite ashamed of teaching such a dunce. I cannot permit her to have her ride to-day.'

'Excuse me, Madame Mère,' returned her son-in-law brusquely, 'I believe I mentioned to you that these rides were for the child's health, and had nothing to do with conduct. I intend that Dr. Franklin's orders shall be carried out,' and then he left her. For once Madame Mercier felt she had gone too far. When Marmaduke put his foot down she knew she had to give in.

Philippa could hardly believe her ears when she heard her father ordering Marthe to dress her at once.

'I shall wait for her here,' he said curtly, and Marthe obeyed grumblingly.

'Monsieur was in the rage,' she said afterwards to her mistress. 'He looked black as thunder. One dare not open the lips.' And indeed Marthe could only relieve her ill-temper by concealed jerks and flouts and impatient pushes, which Philippa heeded no more than the wind.

Phil's eyes were still red and swollen, but a beaming smile was on her lips. She felt as though she were in some fairy story. She was the princess riding on her palfrey, and her father was the prince. They were going out to seek their fortunes. When Ladybird broke into a gentle canter Phil laughed aloud with joy.

Ladybird had evidently been used to go fast, and it was almost impossible to restrain her. Mr. Nugent left her to Tom and followed them leisurely. They were soon out of sight, but presently Phil cantered back to him, her eyes shining with excitement and her fair hair streaming behind her.

'Why, my girlie, what is it?' he asked in an amused tone. For the first time he thought Phil looked almost pretty.

'Oh, father, what do you think?' she exclaimed breathlessly. 'That poor boy is on the bench yonder, and Ladybird knew him and would not pass. She danced all over the road, and Tom thought she was naughty and just threatened her with the whip, and the boy called out, "Oh, don't hurt her; it is only fun and play, and she wants me to speak to her."'

'What boy? Do you mean Ronald Thurston?'

'I suppose that's his name,' returned the child in a puzzled tone, 'but he did not tell me. And, father,

just listen. The moment he said that, Ladybird kicked up her heels and whinnied, and he came out into the road and patted and talked to her. And Ladybird put her head against him, just as if she loved him. But oh, father, I am sure the poor boy was crying.'

'Where is he?—let us go to him,' and then Tom turned the pony's head, and the little procession moved on again.

Ronald watched their approach gloomily. He sat with bent shoulders, his hands thrust deep in his pockets and his cap tilted over his eyes. When he saw Mr. Nugent he rose sulkily from the bench. Mr. Nugent held out his hand to him with a cheery smile. He understood boys well enough to know that under this apparent sullenness Ronald was trying to conceal his strong emotion at the sight of his favourite.

'Well, my lad, are you having a walk this fine afternoon? Come and let me introduce you to my little girl. Philippa, you know Mrs. Thurston—this is her son, Ronald. Ah, the pony knows you, I see,' as Ladybird renewed her endearments, rubbing against him gently and snuffing at him in delighted recognition. Then his pride in his favourite overcame Ronald's ill-humour.

'She would not pass me, sir,' he said exultantly. 'She planted her four feet firmly on the ground, and just whinnied to me like a Christian talking. And when I whistled to her she started dancing, and then that fellow,' indicating Tom by a contemptuous jerk of the elbow, 'wanted to hit her. Fancy hitting Ladybird,' and Ronald looked at her lovingly.

'Tom shan't hit her, Ronald,' observed Phil, much touched by this. 'Ladybird may dance and play as much as she likes, mayn't she, father?'

'Yes, of course,' he returned rather absently. 'Ronald, lad, suppose you take Tom's place and come back with us to the Old House. That would be better than a lonely walk, and it is a half-holiday.' Then both Ronald and Phil coloured with pleasure.

'Oh, thank you, sir! yes, I should like to come,' stammered Ronald gratefully.

'And I shall like it too,' returned Phil joyously. 'We can show Ronald Ladybird's new stable. And oh, father,' here she grew wistful and shy, 'do let me whisper something in your ear,' and Mr. Nugent approached her smilingly. Evidently the whisper pleased him, for the smile was still on his face as he turned to Ronald.

'My little girl is not quite happy in her mind,' he said. 'She thinks that you and Ladybird are so fond of each other that you ought to see her sometimes. What do you say to a ride once a week? won't that cheer you and Ladybird up, eh?' and Mr. Nugent put his hand kindly on his shoulder. But the boy's heart was too full for speech.

'You can go home, Tom,' observed Mr. Nugent, raising his voice, and Tom touched his cap and vanished. Then Ronald pulled himself together.

'I am ever so much obliged to you, sir,' he said gratefully, 'but I don't think I ought to have rides. Ladybird isn't mine now. She has another owner.' But the sadness in Ronald's voice was too much for Phil's tender little heart.

'She can belong to both of us,' she said eagerly, 'can't she, father? She can have a master and a mistress too. Ronald, do say you will ride her. I shall like it ever so much more if you do. I think I could spare Ronald two rides a week, father.' But

Phil panted a little as though her self-renunciation was an effort almost beyond her strength.

'No, my pet, only one ride a week,' returned Mr. Nugent. 'Ronald has to play cricket and football other days, and except in the holidays he could not spare more time. Tom had better fetch your saddle, and we will keep it at the Old House.' And then indeed Ronald's face grew crimson with pleasure.

'Thank you awfully, sir,' he replied with a quivering lip; 'and you too,' glancing at Phil's childish face. Ronald never allowed that Phil was plain from that day. 'I like that sort of face,' he would say, 'and she has nice eyes.' And indeed at that moment the ordinary, little, pale-faced child might have been a vision of celestial beauty for all Ronald knew.

They started for the Old House after this, Phil sitting very erect, and Ronald walking beside her and talking to her in the most confidential fashion.

Ronald was shown Ladybird's new quarters, then they adjourned to the library, and Mr. Nugent ordered tea.

It was a pretty scene, he thought. Phil sat at the head of the table and poured out tea, and when her trembling little hands could hardly accomplish the task Ronald helped her.

'Oh, father, why can't I always have tea downstairs?' cried Phil, almost beside herself with this tremendous excitement. It was the first time she had ever spoken to a boy of Ronald's age. When he had gone she talked of him very freely.

'He is not beautiful, like Mrs. Thurston,' she said gravely; 'but boys are not beautiful, are they, father? But I like him, oh, I like him so much! When he comes again he says he will teach me draughts and

dominoes, and he is going to give me some of his prettiest speckled birds' eggs, because he says I am so kind about Ladybird. Oh, I do love Ronald, I do—I do!' and then Phil kissed her father and went back to her nursery, and that night she slept sweetly and tranquilly, and no Mother Peak haunted her dreams.

Madame Mercier made no more attempts to stop Philippa's rides—she had to find other modes of punishment for the child's little sins of omission and commission, but Marthe complained loudly that the fatigue of accompanying Mademoiselle was altogether intolerable. 'It is a conspiracy,' she would say angrily; '*le méchant garçon* makes the whistle, and then Ladybird, she gives the jumps, and I have my heart in my mouth, thinking the little Meess will be killed before my eyes. I cry out, oh Ciel!—and pouf, they are out of sight in a moment. It is galloping they are after; and for me, I puff and pant, and there is dust in my throat, but I cannot overtake them.' But Marthe forbore to add that she solaced her anxiety by sitting down on a bench and knitting at her coarse blue stocking until they chose to return to her.

Marthe was not without her virtues; she was never idle for a moment. On winter evenings, when Phil was tired of her solitary games, she would sit on the rug and watch Marthe as she knitted the coarse blue yarn that stained her fingers.

'Don't you never play, Marthe?' Phil had once asked her when she was a mere baby. 'Don't you never want a dollie to cuddle?' Then Marthe had smiled grimly.

'*La poupée* was not for such as her,' she returned gruffly; 'neither the skip nor the ball. It was only the rich little Meess who had time to play; for her

part, when one had to tend a grazing cow, and knit stockings for eight brothers, the day was not too long.' But it may be doubted how much Phil understood of this.

Phil loved to sit on the rug in the twilight and make pictures in the glowing fire. What luminous caverns, what dwarfs and elves, what strange palaces and temples seemed to rise before her. When Marthe was in a good humour she would let Phil crouch at her feet contentedly, but at other times she would drag her up with ungentle hands. 'Go,' she would say angrily, 'you have scorched your face; look at your pin-before'—Martha always called it 'pin-before'—'there is the corner for the idle little Meess who scorches her pin-before,' and poor Phil would stand with her face to the wall, with all the little fire elves dancing behind her.

Sometimes, when Marthe was in the mood, she would talk to the child about her home. She had been born in Antwerp, but the family had migrated to Brittany. If Phil had been older she might have been able to appreciate those strong, rough sketches, but to her childish mind it was all so puzzling and inexplicable. Why did cows take walks when they ate grass? The cows Phil saw were all in green fields, yet Marthe was for ever telling her that the sun had scorched her as she knitted and watched their cow by the roadside. But Marthe went on in her stolid way; if the little Meess did not understand, that was not her affair.

Marthe's harsh voice softened a little as she spoke of her home: the dark narrow house swarming with children was evidently a cherished memory. The low room with its red brick floor, its black stove and its *pot-au-feu*, the small window and heavy rafters, from

which dangled dried herbs and long strings of onions, the box-beds, the close garlic-scented atmosphere, were all described, even to the gaudy pictures of the Blessed Virgin and St. Stephen the Martyr.

'Etienne is the youngest,' she would say. 'Look, this pair of *bas bleu* is for him, because he goes barefoot. Pierre shall have the next, he is *bon garçon*,' and so on; but the little peasants in their blue blouses, with their dark shaven heads and merry faces, were far more invisible to Phil than the elves that danced in the fire. Eight brothers and three sisters—surely Marthe was to be envied, she thought.

The following Sunday Ronald wore a brighter face when he went home.

'Oh, mother, what do you think?' he burst out, as she gave him her usual quiet kiss, 'I actually had a ride on Ladybird yesterday, and didn't she go at a famous pace.'

'On Ladybird!' exclaimed Valerie in an astonished voice; she could scarcely believe her ears.

'Oh, you are not going to take us in like that,' returned Pansy, who was in a teasing mood. 'Don't you believe him, Marmee, he is light-headed and a little feverish; let me feel your pulse, Ron,' but Ronald only doubled his fists at her.

'You shut up, Pansy,' he returned; 'little girls should be seen, not heard. You may put your fingers in your ears if you like, but I mean to tell mother all about it.'

And then Ronald gave a graphic description of his visit to the Old House, and of his memorable ride.

'They let me chuck football,' he continued; 'so, as I had plenty of time, I went on to the Grange, and weren't they just surprised to see me. I told Tom to

ask Stephenson for my saddle, because I did not want you to know beforehand. Wasn't it jolly of Mr. Nugent, mother; he is no end of a brick, I can tell you.'

'I think my little friend Philippa is a brick too, Ron.'

'I think she is far the brickiest,' observed Pansy thoughtfully. 'Now I come to think of it, there is no such word—not that that matters. Would it not be a good plan, Marmee, if every household had its own special dictionary of coined words; it would be such fun inventing them and finding out meanings. I am so sick of your schoolboy terms, Ron—all good fellows, and trumps, and bricks; if you want to express admiration of a person like Mr. Nugent why don't you call him an unwinged angel, or a perfect masterpiece, or a cherubic man; it would be far more picturesque, but schoolboys are such soulless little animals.'

'Oh, get out,' was Ronald's sole reply, and then Valerie put a stop to this remarkable argument by telling Pansy that it was time for them to get ready for service.

As they took their places in the choir, Ronald nudged Pansy and whispered that Mr. Nugent and his little girl were behind them, and Pansy was injudicious enough to reply 'that the cherubic man always attended divine service,' which made Ronald chuckle audibly, much to Pansy's dismay.

Valerie was happily oblivious of all this, and she was somewhat surprised on leaving the Cathedral to see Philippa's eager little face peeping at her between the palings, while her father talked to a friend.

When Valerie smiled at her the child ran to her at once.

'Oh, Mrs. Thurston,' she said earnestly, 'I do love my dear Ladybird so much, and I think she likes me too, a little, only not so much as she loves Ronald.'

'I am so glad of that, my sweet,' and Valerie stooped down to the child and kissed her with real tenderness; 'it was very dear of you to let my poor boy have such a nice ride.'

'Oh, I liked it, and so did Ladybird. I asked Gran to let me look out of the drawing-room window, and I saw them galloping down the road—oh, so fast, it made me quite giddy to watch them.' Then she paused, and went on shyly, 'I want to tell you a secret—such a nice one. Father says—you ought to know—Ronald is to have a ride every week, and oh, do just listen, Ladybird will have a master and a mistress too.'

Valerie's eyes grew a little misty. 'Thank you, darling,' she said gently. 'Now, will you run to your father? He is talking to some gentleman by the big elm. Take her, Ronald, and then you can run after us,' and Valerie walked on with Pansy.

But the next minute Ronald overtook them; he was breathless with haste. 'Mother,' he panted, 'they want me to go back to the Old House with them and have tea; may I?'

'By all means, dear, if you wish it, but you must not trespass too much on Mr. Nugent's hospitality.'

'Oh, they want me right enough,' he replied carelessly. 'Thanks awfully, mother, it will be such fun; they give you prime grub at the Old House, cakes and jam and all sorts of good things. I shall give Ladybird her supper too,' and Ronald's eyes sparkled; but though Valerie answered him cheerfully, she sighed as she turned away.

All the week she looked forward to those Sunday evenings with her boy; they had quiet talks as they paced the garden or sat by the fireside in the twilight. To-night Pansy was going to church, and she would be alone, with only her sad thoughts for company.

'Father,' asked Phil, as they stood on the green waiting for Ronald, 'why don't other people say nice things to me as Mrs. Thurston does?' She put this question very solemnly, but her father answered her jestingly.

'Am I permitted to ask what your new lady-love calls you?' but Phil only coloured and looked shy. 'What!' in pretended astonishment, 'my girlie have a secret from her father and refuse to tell it?'

'But it isn't a secret, father; only it is so nice, so very nice.' Then in a whisper, 'She called me "my sweet," she did indeed,' and then Phil sidled closer. 'You have never called me that, father, have you?' But his only answer was to draw her closer to his side. If Phil could have read her father's heart at that moment her childish affections would have been satisfied.

CHAPTER XVII

THE ROADSIDE CARAVAN

'Who says the world is all cold? There is the sun and the shadows, and the heavens, which ordains poverty or sickness, sends pity and love and succour.'—THACKERAY.

VALERIE was anxious to be settled in Roadside before the Christmas holidays began, and Pansy fully agreed with her that nothing was to be gained by delay.

'When one is going to be hanged,' she remarked rather forcibly, 'it is no use having a long rope. The Refuge for the Destitute is all ready, so we may as well take possession of it'; and, having eased her mind by these pleasing reflections, Pansy put her shoulder to the wheel and, as she phrased it, worked like a nigger.

The box-like dimensions of the rooms at Roadside made the placing of furniture a somewhat difficult achievement, and Pansy might well be forgiven when she observed somewhat petulantly to her step-mother that she intended to re-christen Roadside and call it the Caravan; 'for it is little bigger than one,' she continued, 'and when the piano and writing-table are in the sitting-room we shall have to take turns in getting up from our chairs, for two people will not be able to

move at once,' and though this was a mere figure of speech, there was so little space between the furniture that one thing after another had to be reluctantly discarded and sent back.

Valerie was truly thankful that hands and head were so fully occupied. Work was a real boon to her. Pansy secretly marvelled at her quiet serenity. She looked less sad as the days passed on, and there was less manifest effort in her cheerfulness.

'Marmee is such a dear,' Pansy said once to Mrs. Walcott, 'she is making the best of things, but, of course, I know how she feels underneath ; it is just her unselfishness, she is thinking of us and not of herself.'

'I think some one else is unselfish too,' returned Mrs. Walcott, with a kind smile, and then the girl blushed, as though she had received unexpected praise.

Valerie hardly understood herself at this period of her existence ; she seemed to have come to a parting of the ways. Behind her lay the old unsatisfying life, with its crushed hopes and bitter disillusions, its eager demands for happiness, its soul hunger and material prosperity, and before her lay the unexplored years—poverty and many cares—and freedom. Yes, freedom ! For the first time since her girlhood she was free to live up to her own ideals of truth and duty. There were no galling restrictions on her liberty, no arbitrary human will to coerce her actions or fetter her movements. The obedience of the wife had sorely trammelled her, but the widow was a free woman ; her path might be lonely and desolate, but there were no obstructions ; her earthly and heavenly horizons were wider as they opened out before her sad eyes.

To a thoughtful and habitually devout mind like

Valerie Thurston's, the pressure of circumstance is but the emphasising touch of the Divine finger that guides and impels the bewildered pilgrim into the right path. The unknown ways of life are so devious and so bewildering that one needs to be led or driven, but not all have sufficient faith to whisper, 'One step's enough for me,' and then to give themselves up with child-like submission to be guided, as Valerie was striving to do.

Her married life had been filled with storm and stress, and mind and heart had both suffered; but now she prayed and hoped for peace.

She was still young in years, not quite thirty-two, but in her worn condition of nerves no bright future seemed possible to her. 'I must live and work for the children,' she would say to herself, as she paced the garden paths in those dreary November afternoons, 'it is all I can do for Alban now,' for her loyalty to her dead husband seemed to crave for some self-sacrifice, and not even Ronald's happiness was nearer to her heart than the happiness of Alban's daughter. It soothed her pained scrupulosity to feel that there was something she could still do for him. 'He knows now how hard I tried to do my duty to him,' she would say again and again, 'and how it hurt me to thwart and differ from him. In the higher life, the life of Paradise,' she went on musingly, 'the vision will be cleared, and there will be no more misunderstanding. God grant I may be counted worthy to join him there when this long weariness is over,' for in her humility all faults but her own were forgotten, and in her wifely creed she devoutly believed in that heavenly training that would purge all earthly dross.

When Valerie announced that the date of their

removal to Roadside was fixed for the eighteenth of December, Pansy looked at her aghast.

'Why, Marmee,' she exclaimed in strong indignation, 'you cannot surely have forgotten that the eighteenth is your birthday!' Then a faint smile crossed Valerie's pale face.

'No, dear, I was well aware of it; but there could be no better day for turning over a new page and making a fresh beginning. Don't look so horrified, Pansy; there is method in my madness,' and she refused to listen to another word on the subject.

Mrs. Walcott had found a servant who was likely to suit them—a fresh-coloured, good-tempered country girl, the daughter of one of their tenants.

'I think Phebe Adams will just do for you,' she had said to Valerie. 'The Adamses are a large family—a baker's dozen of boys and girls—and they must all work. Mrs. Adams says Phebe is a grand cleaner, and though she is not much of a hand at cooking she can make bread and boil potatoes, and you and Pansy must teach her the rest'; and as the wages were low, and she liked the look of the girl, Valerie was thankful to engage her.

Most of the furniture had been already placed in Roadside, and only finishing touches were needed, so when breakfast was over on the eighteenth Pansy went off alone to the new house, where Phebe was to join her, while Valerie remained behind to dismiss the servants and to give final directions to the caretakers. The parting with her husband's old and faithful domestics was a trying ordeal, but Valerie strove to soften the inevitable pain by words of praise and valuable presents, which she and Pansy could ill afford. It was a comfort to her kind heart to know that the

older servants had no need to seek other service, and that the younger ones had already found good situations; but her voice faltered over the parting words, and when the last had tearfully withdrawn she gave way to the emotion she so rarely indulged, then she dried her eyes and went out into the garden to take a last look at the plants and shrubs she had planted.

It was quite late in the afternoon when she hurried through the dusk down the long dull road that led to her new home. She had chosen this hour that no one might recognise or accost her, but the loneliness, the darkness, and the dank clinging mist oppressed her terribly. She felt as though she were living through a nightmare; the world seemed dead, there was no traffic, no passers-by, only her own footsteps broke the silence. It was a relief when a gleam of light from the unshuttered window of Roadside streamed out over the path, and the next moment Pansy appeared at the open door, with Phebe's broad smiling face behind her.

'Oh, Marmee, how late you are!' she exclaimed; 'I thought something must have happened.' Then her voice changed. 'Oh, you poor dear thing! come in, and you shall be warmed and fed before you look at anything; come into Scylla, please, we will have our supper in Charybdis,' and with the gentlest hands Pansy removed her wraps and then led her proudly in to inspect her finishing touches.

Valerie stood still in amazement. After the darkness and dreariness the little sitting-room looked delightfully bright and cosy. There was a blazing fire, and the lamp was lighted; and the little tea-table placed close to her favourite low chair, with her special melon-shaped teapot, was pleasantly suggestive of comfort.

The curtains were drawn over the glass door leading to the garden, and Valerie's fern-table stood before it. Every available space on table and mantelpiece was filled by vases of hothouse flowers sent from the Deanery. In spite of its small size and low ceiling it was really a charming little sitting-room, and Valerie's expressions of surprise and pleasure fully satisfied Pansy.

'Well, perhaps it is not so bad by candle-light,' she observed grudgingly. 'You see, Marmee, your pretty curtains shut out the horrid view front and back, and all the furniture and ornaments are so nice and well chosen. We have each a snug little corner of our own, and, as you perceive, the Black Prince has taken possession of the rug as usual,' and Pansy smoothed her favourite's glossy coat, eliciting loud purrs in response to her caresses.

Valerie enjoyed her tea; she was in that languid quiescent mood which often follows prolonged emotion. Her feelings resembled those of a shipwrecked mariner who finds himself lifted by some friendly wave and deposited on the beach, bruised and beaten, but with his life in him and in perfect safety.

As soon as she was sufficiently warmed and rested they set out on a tour of inspection through the house.

The dining-room had a snug appearance, and the books had all been arranged to the best advantage; the handsome plush curtains, relics of former luxury, were drawn over the mean little window. Pansy looked round on her handiwork with much pride, as her step-mother expressed her cordial approval.

'I am glad you are pleased, Marmee,' she said in a gratified tone. 'Our Roadside Caravan is like an old faded beauty—she looks best by night, when her

wrinkles and defects are not seen. Now let us go and inspect Phebe's pots and pans, and then we will go up Jacob's ladder,'—for it was thus Pansy chose to designate the steep narrow staircase. Valerie smiled to herself at the girl's quaint conceit. What did it matter how ladder-like it was if only the heavenly visitant Peace should watch their threshold, and guardian angels pass up and down on their errands of mercy!

There was still much to be done upstairs; the landing was blocked up with trunks full of wearing apparel and chests of household linen. Valerie's pictures and books were in a corner of the bedroom, but the soft carpet, bright fire, and pretty cretonne curtains gave the room an air of comfort. There were flowers on the toilet table, and a note on the pin-cushion. When Pansy left her for a moment, Valerie knelt down on the rug and read it by the firelight.

She was touched to find that it was from Mrs. Walcott. She had seen her earlier in the day, when she came across from the Deanery with a pretty birth-day gift, and now she had sent this kindly greeting.

'My dear Valerie,' she wrote, 'I am following you step by step through this trying day; but I will not intrude myself on you and Pansy. You and she will be better alone to-night. I am putting myself in your place, you see, and am trying to think how I should feel under these circumstances, and it seems to me as any outside companionship and sympathy would only jar on you both. Am I right, dear? Yes, I am sure I am.

'But I shall be with you in spirit. Just now the Dean gave such a heavy sigh. "I am thinking of those two poor things, Margaret," he said. "My heart aches for them"—there, I thought I must tell you that—the

best and warmest lining for one's little home nest is the kindly thoughts of those who love us. There is a sentence I have just read which I must copy for you: "When God puts out His street-lamps the sun is near." Is not the thought original and striking? One sees so many human lamps extinguished during one's life, and then the only comfort is to remember the dawn. One of your lamps is turned into darkness, my poor Valerie; but you will not miss it when the sunshine comes. Good-night, my dear, and God bless you.—Your loving friend, MARGARET WALCOTT.'

Contrary to her usual habits of reserve, Valerie handed this letter to Pansy. There was a softened look in the girl's eyes when she gave it back.

'Isn't she a dear woman, Marmee? I do love her for being so good to you. But she is right. We are better alone to-night.' And then Pansy planted herself on the rug, and drew Valerie's arms round her in her coaxing childish way.

'There we are, as cosy as possible, Marmee, dear. Things won't be really unbearable, will they, as long as we have each other?'

'But when you leave me, Pansy,' in a sad voice.

'Oh, we will not talk of that,' hastily. 'I am not going to leave you for years. We are going to be a sort of female Darby and Joan. I should not be a bit surprised if I am an old maid after all, but I shall never be a cut and dried one. I am afraid I shall always be an old child, not a bit cherubic, you know, but bubbling over with fun and mischief. I mean to cultivate cheerfulness as a fine art. If you can't be aisy, be as aisy as you can. Those are my sentiments, Marmee,' and Pansy rested her little soft chin on her

step-mother's hand, and her blue eyes were full of womanly tenderness, and no wonder Valerie's heavy heart was cheered. After all she had her blessings—her boy, and this bright, warm-hearted little creature, and bread to eat, and a roof over her head, and the infinite possibilities of life.

When, a few days later, Ronald came home for his Christmas holidays, he found his mother and Pansy far more cheerful than he expected.

The house was in perfect order, and Ronald's new room as comfortable and well furnished as any boy could wish. Nevertheless, it was with difficulty that he could stammer out the approval for which Pansy was evidently waiting.

'Don't you think Marmee and I have done wonders, Ron?' she said at last, somewhat disappointed by his embarrassed manner.

'Oh yes,' he returned hurriedly; 'and it is awfully snug and warm, and all that sort of thing. And your new name, the Roadside Caravan, just suits it. It makes one feel like Jack in a box, don't you know.'

Pansy nodded, and her face grew grave. She had had just the same feelings herself.

'If you and mother would not mind, I think I will go out and have a bit of a walk now,' went on Ronald, who felt more suffocated every minute, and when Pansy made no objection, and obligingly opened the door for him, Ronald inhaled the raw damp air as though it were a summer breeze.

'Fancy being bricked up in that beastly little hole all the year round,' groaned Ronald in a perfect rage of pity and misery; but he was not only thinking of himself. 'Oh, if I were only a man, wouldn't I work for them; but a boy can do nothing but learn.'

Ronald was excessively grumpy for a day or two; but his mother was wise enough to take no notice, and by and by things grew better. 'It is an ill wind that blows no one any good,' says the proverb, and it proved true in Ronald's case, when little Philippa caught a severe cold, and in consequence Ladybird was at Ronald's sole disposal during the holidays.

It was a great boon to the lad, and after his first ride there was a marked improvement in his spirits. Even when the roads were too slippery with snow and ice for this exercise, he and Pansy spent most of the day skating on the big ponds in the neighbourhood. Valerie was too thankful to see them occupied and amused to mind her solitude. She had to train Phebe, and to take cooking lessons from the nice old housekeeper, Mrs. Martin, at the Deanery; and, if she had any spare time on her hands, she would wrap herself up warmly and take long solitary walks.

Once or twice Mr. Nugent came upon her miles away from Wycombe, but he never stopped to accost her. A cheery 'good afternoon' was all that passed between them, but more than once he turned to look after the slender black figure walking so lightly and briskly over the frozen ground.

CHAPTER XVIII

'WHEN THE CAT'S AWAY'

'I was dreadfully alive to nervous terrors. The night time, solitude, and the dark were my hell. The sufferings I endured in this nature would justify the expression. I never laid my head on my pillow, I suppose from the fourth to the seventh or eighth year of my life—so far as memory serves in things so long ago—without an assurance, which realized its own prophecy, of seeing some frightful spectre.'

CHARLES LAMB.

MADAME MERCIER was in a good humour. Not that this was by any means a rare occurrence, when the household machinery moved smoothly and well; but it was sufficiently marked and accentuated on the evening in question to attract Mr. Nugent's notice. It was New Year's evening. Philippa, well wrapped up on account of her cold, had spent the day with her father in the library and laboratory, and had retired to bed with her lap full of toys, too much excited for sleep. Madame Mercier had also spent her day agreeably, in replying to her friends' greetings, and admiring the gay scent sachets and pretty bagatelles sent to her from Paris. The son-in-law's gift had been much appreciated—a collarette and muff of silver fox, that had long been coveted. She had now partaken of an excellent dinner, had told some of her best stories, and was ensconced

in her favourite corner with a cup of coffee and a box of choice bonbons beside her. Mr. Nugent had drawn his chair closer to the fire, and was sitting gazing at the crackling logs, with the air of a man in a brown study. 'A penny for your thoughts, Duke,' exclaimed Madame jocosely, as she helped herself to a crystallised violet, and scrunched the fragrant dainty between her sharp white teeth.

Mr Nugent started and coloured slightly.

'This warm room makes one meditative—in other words, sleepy,' he returned evasively. 'Shall we have a game of cribbage, Madame Mère? That will wake us up.'

Madame Mercier's eyes sparkled, she adored cribbage, and she could seldom induce Marmaduke to play with her; all games except chess bored him, and he thought them waste of time. Madame Mercier was obliged to play Patience evening after evening for her own amusement. Patience soothed her nerves and helped her to sleep, she would explain to her friends. If Mr. Nugent wished to propitiate his mother-in-law, he could not have acted more judiciously; Madame Mère's good humour increased with each game she won. When they had finished, instead of commenting on the lateness of the hour, as usual, Mr. Nugent took up his position on the rug again.

'Madame Mère,' he said quickly, 'it has struck me more than once that it would be a kind attention on your part if you were to call on those ladies at Roadside—I mean Mrs. Thurston and her daughter,' as Madame Mercier looked a little puzzled.

'Dear me, Duke!' she returned, 'can you be talking of Canon Thurston's widow—the mother of that dark, plain boy who rides Philippa's pony?'

Mr. Nugent frowned, as though this description did not please him. 'Ronald is not really plain,' he observed; 'his features are rather strongly marked for his age, but he is a fine lad. By the bye, he is coming to tea to-morrow, so you can tell Marthe that Philippa will have hers with us.'

Madame Mercier shrugged her shoulders, and her voice lost a little of its smoothness.

'My dear Duke,' she returned, with an evident effort to preserve her amiability, 'are you not breaking our compact? I thought I had charge of my granddaughter, but it appears that I am mistaken. Pray do not misunderstand me'—as her son-in-law was too much astonished at this to speak; 'of course you have a right to your child's company whenever you think fit, but I must protest against this ridiculous friendship between Philippa and a boy of Ronald's age. In my young days my excellent parents would have sent me to bed for the day if I had ventured to speak to one of the young gentlemen'—for Madame Mercier's father had had a large preparatory school.

Mr. Nugent suppressed a smile. 'The world was a very different place when you were young, Madame Mère,' he returned quietly. 'Young people have more freedom nowadays. I have not the least objection to Phil being with Ronald, he is a nice gentlemanly boy, and she seems very fond of him. Of course,' as Madame Mère tossed her white curls and looked unutterable things, 'it would be better for my little girl to have playmates nearer her age and of her own sex—little Daisy Hammond, for example, she is a nice child enough,' but Madame Mercier turned a deaf ear to this.

'My dear Louise had no playfellows,' she replied. 'The only time I had to punish her severely was when

she was discovered playing with the baker's daughter, a common child, with blue beads round her neck, but I need not say the offence was not repeated. My Louise was docility itself. But it appears to me, my dear Duke,' with rather an acid smile, 'that we have wandered away from our subject, which has nothing to do with Philippa at all. If my ears did not deceive me, you were asking me to call on Mrs. Thurston.'

'To be sure I was,' returned Mr. Nugent; 'but why do you seem so surprised at my request? It is perfectly simple. Mrs. Thurston has lost her husband, she is in sadly reduced circumstances, it is only a kind and neighbourly attention, surely.'

'Indeed!' with much dignity. 'I am afraid Mrs. Thurston would regard such a visit rather in the light of an intrusion. Her circumstances may be reduced, as you say, and certainly Roadside is a miserable little place, but this does not alter the fact that we are newcomers, and that it is Mrs. Thurston's prerogative to call on us.'

It was plain that this side of the question had not occurred to Mr. Nugent, and though, man-like, he frowned and pished at these ridiculous conventionalities that hindered true neighbourly feeling, he could not deny that Madame Mère was right. Mrs. Thurston might be a queen of society dethroned, but she was still a queen, and any patronage on their part would certainly be regarded as intrusion.

'You seem put out, Duke,' observed Madame Mercier a little maliciously, as she arranged her lace ruffles. Nothing pleased her more than to get the better of her grand son-in-law in a domestic argument; the little ironies and tyrannies of daily life were dear to her very soul.

'No, no, you are quite right,' he returned hastily. 'I forgot Wycombe etiquette when I proposed your calling at Roadside,' and then, to prevent any more words, he wished his mother-in-law good-night and went up to his study. He felt heated and perturbed—the usual result of an evening spent in the scented atmosphere of the drawing-room and after an hour of Madame Mère's agreeable conversation.

'She was right for once,' he muttered, 'I was a fool to propose it; we must do it another way, there is plenty of time, there is no need to hurry matters,' and then he broke off and took up his book, and read for an hour before he went to bed.

The next evening, as Ronald was casting furtive glances at the tea-table, and waiting until Mr. Nugent was ready to attend to him, Marthe came down with a message from Madame Mercier. 'Madame was in despair at disappointing the young gentleman,' remarked Marthe stolidly, 'but the little Meess had made her cold worse, and her cough was tearing her to pieces. Madame had desired her to give her the *tisane* and keep her warm by the nursery fire.'

For one moment there was a subtle look of amusement in Mr. Nugent's eyes. He knew Madame Mère's little ways by this time—she disapproved of the friendship with Ronald, and would take every means in her power to keep them separate; but he answered the girl quietly: 'Very well, Marthe, keep her warm by all means. Now, Ronald, draw your chair to the table and begin your tea.'

'Were they very, very much disappointed?' asked poor Philippa when Marthe returned to the nursery; her new baby doll had been bedewed with her tears, she had had such a happy day looking forward to the treat

of seeing her dear Ronald, and an hour ago her grandmother had come up and told her abruptly that her cold was bad, and she must remain with Marthe, and be put to bed early; and she had been quite angry with her when Philippa begged to wrap up and go downstairs.

'It is not really worse, Gran; I have only coughed twice, haven't I, Marthe?' and then Madame Mercier told her that no well-behaved child ever contradicted grown-up people.

'When I tell you your cold is worse, it is worse; mind that, Philippa. Give her plenty of hot linseed-tea, Marthe; there is nothing so soothing to the chest.'

Poor Philippa! It was little use for her to gasp out, between her sobs, 'that Ronald had come to see her, and would be so disappointed.'

Madame Mercier only put on her severest look. 'If you are going to be naughty, Philippa, Marthe had better put you to bed at once,' and this threat so frightened the child that she choked back her tears; bed only meant darkness and Mother Peak and Co., and even her solitary nursery was cheerful in comparison.

Marthe gave a contemptuous sniff when Philippa propounded her artless little question. 'Disappointed, *hein!* how should she know? she could hear the young gentleman laughing, he seemed well amused,' and then Philippa sat down to her thick bread and butter; not daring to confess that she was not hungry for fear Marthe should say she was ill, and must go to bed; but at last the effort was too much for her, and she was obliged to lay down her second slice.

'Perhaps it is my cold, Marthe,' she said timidly; 'but it is so dry to-night that it quite sticks in my throat,' which was not surprising, as stale bread cut thickly, with

very little butter, is not appetising to an invalid; but Marthe took offence at once.

'Hold there, Meess Philippa,' she observed, 'what would Madame, your grandmother, say to such daintiness? It is just temper and obstinacy; you are *méchante*, Meess; either you eat the good food *le bon Dieu* has sent you, or I undress and put you to bed; so choose.'

'Oh, please no, Marthe, I will try—I will try'; but as Philippa nervously bit into the slice, scared by her *bonne's* severe aspect and stony glance, there was a tap at the door, and the next moment a dark boyish face peeped in.

'All right, we are not a bit late,' exclaimed Ronald cheerfully to some one in the background. 'She has only just begun her tea: shut your eyes, Phil, till I tell you when to open them; honour bright, you know.'

A thrill of delicious ecstasy shot through Phil's slight frame, as she obediently closed her eyes, holding them by force with hot shaking hands, for fear she should be tempted to take just one peep.

'There, now, you may go on with your tea,' observed Ronald patronisingly, and then Phil slowly opened her eyes; the plate of stale bread and butter had been whisked away, and a beautiful china plate, full of dainties, was before her. A delectable wedge of Christmas cake, with snow-white icing, a rosy-cheeked apple and banana, and a preserved apricot. Phil gave a shrill little cry of mingled pleasure and astonishment; but Marthe, who had regarded Ronald's proceedings with much displeasure, interposed with her usual brusqueness.

'The little Meess has no appetite; I will take care of the gâteau and the bonbons until to-morrow,' and she

was actually stretching out her hand for the plate when Mr. Nugent desired her not to touch it.

'I am not surprised that she has no appetite for stale bread and butter,' he said in a displeased tone. 'Why cannot the child have a nice basin of bread and milk; you would like that, would you not, Phil?'

'Oh yes, father,' she returned; 'Marthe knows that I love bread and milk, and I do have it for my breakfast, you know.'

'Then you can have it for tea too; tell Madame Mercier that I say so,' and then he desired Marthe rather curtly to finish her tea and clear the table.

Phil, meanwhile, was wading steadily through her good things, under Ronald's benevolent supervision; there was no want of appetite now; Phil was making a good square meal of forbidden dainties; then, when she had finished, and Marthe with a sour expression had carried off the tray, the table was pushed into a corner, and Ronald inaugurated a game of blind man's buff, in which Mr. Nugent actually joined.

Madame Mercier, coming out of her room, listened on the landing with a bewildered expression to the scudding footsteps over her head; she could hear Phil's joyous shrieks and Ronald's boyish laughter.

'What does this horrible noise mean, Marthe?' she inquired sternly; but Marthe, who was in a temper, only shrugged her shoulders.

'How could she know what it meant, English games were nothing to her; it was the topsy-turvy, they tie a handkerchief over some one's eyes, and then they run like mad, and every one screams.'

'Blind man's buff,' muttered Madame wrathfully, 'and my precious son-in-law is at the bottom of the mischief; he is becoming troublesome, but we shall see

who is likely to be master. Marthe,' speaking with greater asperity than usual to her favourite, 'it is already past Miss Philippa's bedtime; will you kindly inform your master of this, and also that the dressing gong has sounded?'

Mr. Nugent was quite aware of these two facts, but he lingered in the nursery until the last moment, and to Philippa's joy he also promised to bid her good-night before he went into his study. His last paternal act was to tell Marthe that no linseed-tea was necessary that night, as there was nothing the matter with the child's chest. 'You can throw it away,' he said dryly, and Marthe, with all her obstinacy and ill-humour, did not venture to argue the point. 'Remember about the bread and milk to-morrow evening,' he went on, looking her full in the face. No wonder, as Marthe remarked afterwards to Madame, that Monsieur was in one of his difficult moods, and that she, Marthe, would not venture to disobey him; she had reason to say so before the evening had ended.

Mr. Nugent was not easily roused, his nature was pacific, and, like many clever men, he was somewhat absent-minded, but his eyes were opening now with a vengeance. Was it right that a sensitive child like Phil should be left to the tender mercies of a prejudiced, narrow-minded woman like Madame Mercier? Hitherto he had blinded himself to the petty tyrannies and galling restrictions that were the chief factors in Madame's system of education; he had believed, in spite of her repressive manners, that she had a sincere affection for her daughter's child, but he was beginning to doubt the fact. If she really loved Phil, why did she seem to begrudge her every little pleasure? Perhaps her disapproval of Ronald as a playmate for the little

girl might have some show of reason, but there could be no objection to Daisy Hammond.

When Madame Mercier saw her son-in-law's face, as they sat down to dinner, she thought it wiser to say nothing about the nursery revels, but to take her revenge later. 'We shall see—oh yes, we shall see who is to be master,' she thought, as she ate her slice of pheasant.

Mr. Nugent was very silent during the meal; only once or twice he glanced somewhat keenly at his opposite companion. A strange mood of impatience was on him. Good heavens! why had he been such a fool, he thought, as to saddle himself with this incubus, to make this frivolous little despot the mistress of his house? He looked at the smooth sallow face, without line or wrinkle, the steely-blue gray eyes and fluffy white hair. Madame Mercier was an old woman; a perfumed, gorgeously-dressed old lady in satin raiment, swathed picturesquely in fine old lace, and it seemed to him suddenly as though she were only the mummy of a woman, and that in spite of her cleverness, her wit, her tact and carefully uttered moralities, that she had little heart and less soul.

Little did Madame Mercier think, as she cracked her filberts and sipped her sherry, that her spiteful treatment of Philippa that evening had done more to open her son-in-law's eyes than a hundred similar acts had done, and that however he might delay or hesitate, the supreme reign of Madame there was virtually over from that night, and that he was already cudgelling his man's brains to know how he could best effect a change of dynasty.

'I wonder what Mrs. Thurston would advise under the circumstances,' he thought as he went up to the

nursery to wish Philippa good-night; 'if I could only make a friend of her; she has a kind heart, I found that out the first day, and she is very fond of my little Phil.' Marthe was not in the nursery, she had gone down to her supper, but when he opened the bedroom door he was surprised to find the room in darkness, and Philippa lying with her head under the clothes. She emerged joyfully at the sound of the opening door. 'Oh, father, dear,' she exclaimed, 'how nice to have you! Do sit on the bed and let me cuddle you, like I did once when I was a baby.'

'Yes, presently, Phil, but I want you to tell me first why you were smothering yourself in that ridiculous way; tell me the truth, my child.'

'Oh, please, father,' and Phil's voice was rather ashamed; 'I know it is silly, but though I quite know, because you told me so, that Mother Peak is not really there, I can't get it out of my head that she does live in that corner.'

'Why, Phil, you little goose, how can you be such a baby?—there, there,' as a tear rolled down Phil's cheek, 'I am not scolding you, I must laugh you out of this. I thought I told Marthe that you were always to have a light until she came to bed?'

'I only had a candle one night,' returned Philippa in a small voice. 'Gran would not allow it after that, she was dreadfully angry, and said the nonsense ought to be whipped out of me, and that made me afraid, because Gran does hurt so.'

'You don't mean to tell me, Phil,' he exclaimed, aghast at this revelation, which was perfectly unsuspected by him, 'that your grandmother ever whips you!' his tone rather frightening Phil.

'Oh, only when I am very, very naughty, but

Marthe does it sometimes, when she says I am too *méchante* for the corner. Marthe has a hard hand, but Gran hurts worse, and she raps my knuckles with the big ruler if I do not know my lessons. Where are you going, father?' as Mr. Nugent rose hastily.

'Only into the next room a moment; lie still, darling, and I will be back directly'; and then he closed the door, and rang the bell so loudly that Marthe left her supper unfinished, and was quite breathless with haste. What could have happened? Had the little Meess walked in her sleep and set herself on fire?

'Marthe,' said her master in a peremptory tone, 'light a candle and place it on the chest of drawers in the next room, and then come here,' and when the girl had obeyed him, he continued: 'Now will you be good enough to inform me why my orders have not been carried out. I told you some weeks ago that either the nursery door was to be left open or a candle was to be lighted in Miss Philippa's room, and yet to-night I find her room perfectly dark.'

'It is not my fault,' returned Marthe in a stubborn tone; 'Madame will not hear of a candle, and she has forbidden me to open the door. One cannot obey two people,' went on Marthe with a touch of impertinence in her tone, '*hein!* no, Monsieur must know that is impossible.'

'Then you will obey me,' replied Mr. Nugent sternly. 'It is I who pay your wages, and if I find Miss Philippa shut up again in the dark, you will have to answer to me for your disobedience; and another thing, Marthe, your manners do not please me, they are not sufficiently gentle for a nurse; if Miss Philippa is naughty, you can complain, and leave me to deal with her, but do not attempt to punish her yourself. On your

peril,' here he looked at her with such severity that Marthe quailed before him, 'on your peril lay a finger on her, the result will be instant dismissal from my service—now go down and finish your supper'; and then he went back to Philippa, and holding her hot little hand, told her a story until she fell asleep.

CHAPTER XIX

THE OLD CURIOSITY SHOP

'In consultation with a friend a man tosseth his thoughts more easily; he marshalleth them more orderly; he seeth how they look when they are turned into words; finally he waxeth wiser than himself, and that more by an hour's discourse than by a day's meditation.'—BACON.

WHEN Madame Mercier heard Marthe's account of what had passed that evening, she grew quite white with suppressed rage.

Her audacious son-in-law had invaded her special province, he had actually set her at nought and contradicted her orders; Madame's proud spirit refused to submit to this humiliation; either he must apologise and recant, and take back his absurd threats of dismissing Marthe, or there should be war to the knife between them, and then see who would be victor, and here an unpleasant smile crossed Madame Mercier's face. If woman's wit and woman's malice could avail, there was little doubt that she could soon bring him to submission, but in his present mood she must act wisely, and if necessary resort to subterfuge.

For the first time her faithful ally failed her. Marthe was evidently in terror of her master and refused to hear reason.

'It is not for me to lose a good place, Madame,' she said, shedding angry tears. 'What does it matter whether the door be open or not, Monsieur will come up to inspect, he will see that I obey him. I have orders not to touch the little Meess, not to lay a finger on her; well, there are other ways,' and Marthe shrugged her shoulders.

'Marthe, will you listen to me?' and Madame Mercier spoke in an exasperated tone. 'All this means nothing—words, mere words. Mr. Nugent was put out—in a bad temper, he said more than he meant, there is not the least fear that you will be dismissed,' but Marthe's obstinacy was proof against this appeal.

'Madame had not seen Monsieur's face. She, Marthe, had trembled in her shoes to hear him, the door should be left open, or she would light a candle, and so on,' until Madame Mercier lost her temper.

'You are a fool, Marthe,' she said angrily; 'a great strapping girl like you to be a coward because your master scolds you. Well, I wash my hands of the matter, do as you like, light a dozen candles if you will, they can be put out; and as for not touching Miss Philippa, I can punish her myself without your help. 'Spare the rod and spoil the child'; why, it is against Scripture, you see. My own daughter was not spoilt, and certainly my grand-daughter shall be taught to obey. There, you may leave me, Marthe, my poor nerves are quite upset, and I shall not have a wink of sleep to-night.'

It was well for Philippa that Madame Mercier considered herself too much indisposed to rise the next morning, so there were no lessons and no rapping of knuckles, and she passed a happy morning playing

with her new toys, and dressing and undressing her baby doll.

The morning had been wet, but a delusive gleam of sunshine after luncheon induced Mr. Nugent to take a constitutional; he felt it would be a relief to shake off his perplexing thoughts by brisk exercise, but before he had gone a mile a steady downpour obliged him reluctantly to retrace his steps. He was hurrying through the town when he saw a slight figure in a waterproof, which he at once recognised as Mrs. Thurston, go into an old curiosity shop, probably to take shelter, and after a moment's hesitation he determined to follow her, the opportunity was too good to be lost. He had an excuse to offer, he wanted to ask Mr. Bennett if the carved corner cupboard he had so much admired was still for sale; he had hankered after it for months, waiting until his conscience would allow him to buy it.

Bennett's curiosity shop was a favourite haunt of his, and indeed most visitors to Wycombe were taken there to see the beautiful oak rooms and the fine old carvings.

The shop had been a dwelling-house before it became an emporium for antiquities and bric-à-brac, and many a lover of the antique had lamented somewhat loudly that such a fine old place should be used for such a purpose. The peaked roof and curious windows still made it one of the most picturesque buildings in Wycombe, while the splendid oak panellings and massive rafters, and the carved ceilings and chimney-pieces, were objects of admiration to a connoisseur like Mr. Nugent.

As he stepped through the low doorway that led to the shop he was at once greeted respectfully by the

master, a pale, thoughtful-looking young man, with a pleasing expression, whose face lighted up with pleasure at the sight of one of his best customers.

'The corner cupboard is in the old place, sir,' he said, with a smile. 'The Dean had half a mind to buy it the other day, only his lady told him the Deanery was over-full of furniture as it was. Ladies sometimes spoil a good bargain,' went on Bennett, with a humorous laugh; 'if the Dean had been alone he would have bought it.'

'I am very much obliged to him for leaving it for me,' returned Mr. Nugent. 'Is it still at the old figure, Bennett, or are you disposed to take less?' And then, when terms were arranged and another customer came into the shop, Mr. Nugent remarked carelessly that he would go upstairs and have another look at his new purchase, and amuse himself while the rain lasted by inspecting the curiosities.

'There's a lady up there doing the same thing,' returned Bennett. 'The rain is likely to last a goodish bit, in my opinion. Now, ma'am, what's your pleasure?' and then Mr. Nugent nodded and went upstairs.

On any other occasion he would have stopped a dozen times to admire some quaint bit of Chelsea china, or to covet a curious bit of carving, but his object was to talk to Mrs. Thurston, and to ask her advice, and he was too much in earnest for procrastination. He found her standing before the corner cupboard and evidently lost in admiration of it, for she did not turn her head at the sound of his footsteps; she had laid her waterproof aside on an old screen, and her graceful figure looked to advantage even in the rough black serge she used for daily wear. He was obliged to address her by her name before he could attract her

notice. She started and seemed somewhat embarrassed for the moment, then she laughed a little.

'Have you taken refuge from the rain too?' she asked. 'Having nothing better to do, I am amusing myself with coveting a dozen things belonging to my neighbour—that corner cupboard, for example, and that beautiful old oak chair that exactly matches it. Don't you think that Nell's grandfather must have sat in that chair?'

'I am glad you admire my purchase,' returned Mr. Nugent coolly. 'I have this moment clinched the bargain. I have been wanting that cupboard for months, but until this afternoon I regarded it as a temptation to be resisted. Now I think I must have the chair too; but Bennett is engaged just now.'

'What a comfort it must be to have an elastic conscience,' remarked Mrs. Thurston in an amused tone. 'I suppose a wet afternoon has this sort of effect on one—here I am breaking the tenth commandment to the very best of my ability, and there are you sending all your good resolutions to the winds, and buying carved oak corner cupboards and grandfathers' chairs as though you were Haroun al Raschid himself.'

Mr. Nugent laughed. 'There is a corner of my library that will exactly fit it; nature abhors a vacuum, and so do I. And you called my attention to the chair, please remember that. As the rain shows no intention of abating, may I offer it to you?' but Valerie smilingly shook her head, and seated herself on the window-seat, where she could look down into the street, and, after a momentary pause, Mr. Nugent drew an old three-legged stool forward.

'It is an ill wind that blows no one any good,' he began in a tone that made Valerie turn from the

window. 'Is it not an odd coincidence, Mrs. Thurston? I was in great perplexity last night, and more than once the thought crossed me that if we had only been older friends—you and I—I would have asked your advice——'

'My advice,' and Valerie coloured and drew herself up a little stiffly, as though she thought Mr. Nugent was presuming on their slight acquaintanceship; he read her thoughts at once.

'A lonely man needs help and advice sometimes,' he returned quietly, 'and you have been kind enough to interest yourself in my poor little girl.' Then Valerie's manner at once thawed.

'Oh, it is about my little friend Philippa, is it?' she returned; and as her quick eyes detected the lines of harass and worry on his face, she forgot her slight hauteur.

'Oh, what is it, Mr. Nugent?' she asked in a sweet womanly tone. 'I hope there is nothing wrong with the child; I have not seen her about lately, and Ronald told me she had a cold.'

She had given him the opening he wanted, and the next minute Valerie was listening with unaffected interest to his account of his perplexities.

Mr. Nugent was, of course, guarded in his statements with regard to his mother-in-law, but on the subject of Marthe he expressed himself so strongly that Valerie's first piece of advice was to beg him to dismiss her.

'I have never liked the look of her,' she said frankly, 'one can see from her expression that she has a bad temper. Personally, I should shrink from entrusting any child to her care.'

'I am beginning to share your opinion,' returned

Mr. Nugent, 'but it will be difficult for me to dismiss her—Madame Mercier thinks so much of her, she regards her as a treasure.'

'Yes, I see,' observed Valerie thoughtfully, and then she was silent. She was quick enough to read between the lines; she saw that in spite of his real anxiety to seek advice it was almost impossible for Mr. Nugent to give her his full confidence. This was the truth; he could not be more explicit without exposing his family skelcton. He respected Mrs. Thurston, and he thought most highly of her opinion; from the first moment of their meeting she had influenced him strongly, but at this early stage of their acquaintance he could not speak to her openly of Madame Mère's despotic rule, and only Valerie's natural insight and quickness enabled her to understand him. She soon saw how the land lay, when she found how all her suggestions were set aside as impracticable under the present régime. Madame Mercier had old-fashioned ideas: she could not understand why Philippa should need playfellows—she was old, and objected to noise; neither did she approve of her grand-daughter accepting any invitations—she would not hear of her going to the Hammonds; in fact, Madame Mercier's nursery code seemed to Valerie the very incarnation of tyranny. Under such circumstances any offer of help on her part seemed worse than useless, but when she hinted at this Mr. Nugent looked so downcast that out of sheer kindness of heart Valerie made another suggestion.

'Mr. Nugent,' she said gently, 'it is very difficult for an outsider to give advice, but you must not think that I do not sympathise with your perplexities. They are very real. It is not easy to alter existing arrangements, and perhaps it may not be well to do things in

a hurry; your eyes are open, and it will be comparatively easy for you to keep a watch over the *bonne*. I was going to ask you something—I ought to have called on Madame Mercier long ago, and though I am not paying visits just now, I would make an exception in her case—if you wish it'; but there was no need to ask this question, Mr. Nugent's pleased look was sufficient answer.

'I should be very grateful,' he returned in a low voice. 'Perhaps then you will see for yourself, better than I can tell you; one looks at things from a man's point of view.'

'I think we women have sharper eyes,' returned Valerie, smiling. 'I owe Madame Mercier an apology for not having called on her six months ago. I remember,' with a slight change of tone, 'that my husband once suggested that I should do so; he said Wycombe was breaking up too much into cliques—that the close and the school and the barracks were splitting up into separate factions,—he was always lamenting this.'

'Yes, I know,' returned Mr. Nugent, 'the Dean was speaking to me on the same subject; he said it was a mistake for society to move in such narrow grooves, and that it would be far better for the masters and the officers to mix freely with the Cathedral dignitaries. I fully agreed with him.'

'Very well, then, I will call on Madame Mercier,' observed Valerie quietly. 'I believe the rain has stopped now, Mr. Nugent, and I can leave you to finish your purchases in peace.' She rose as she spoke, and he had no excuse for detaining her, but as he helped her with her waterproof, and escorted her to the door, she said hurriedly:

'You must not lose heart and be too anxious about

your little girl, help generally comes when one needs it most—at least I have always found it so in my case,' and then she shook hands with him, and walked quickly away over the wet sloppy pavement.

'A sweet, true woman,' he thought as he went back into the dark shop, 'she will not blame me in her heart for my unconventionality. I think at first she was a little surprised, she knows what is due to her position, no one would dare to take the fraction of a liberty with Mrs. Thurston; but she is not one to think of herself if she can help others.' The interview had cheered him, in spite of himself, and things no longer looked so hopeless. The thought that Mrs. Thurston had promised to pay a visit to the Old House gave him decided pleasure, and he determined within himself that it would not be his fault if the acquaintance did not soon ripen into intimacy.

He spent the evening with more enjoyment than usual, but though his book was engrossing, he did not take it up until he had paid a visit to the nursery. He was relieved to find that his orders had been obeyed; the bedroom door was open, and Marthe sat by the fire knitting. The pleasant fire-light and the click of Marthe's needles had lulled Philippa into a tranquil sleep. Mr. Nugent would not disturb her, he kissed the thin, little hand lying on the quilt, and stole away. 'Have you had your supper, Marthe?' he asked in more cordial tones than he generally used to the girl, but Marthe answered in her sulky fashion that there was no need for her to go for another ten minutes yet.

'Marthe has found out who is master,' he said to himself complacently as he went downstairs. He little knew that the moment he was safe in his study Madame Mère's velvet slippers padded gently up the

nursery stairs. Marthe looked aghast as the little figure in the satin dress passed her without a word, and shut the door so sharply that Philippa woke in a fright to find herself in darkness.

'Marthe, are you there?' she asked nervously, but there was no answer. Marthe had been so daunted by the silent anger with which Madame Mercier had regarded her that she had stuck her knitting-needles into her ball of blue yarn and had fled precipitately to the society of her fellow-servants. What did it matter to the hireling that a helpless child had been left a prey to nervous terror. What did Madame Mère care either, as she went back to her brilliantly-lighted room.

'We shall see who is master,' she said to herself as she took out her Patience cards. 'Marmaduke may contradict my orders as much as he likes, but Marthe will not open that door again to-night. There will be two visitors to the nursery, my dear Duke, that is all'; and Madame Mercier smiled serenely as she sat down to her game of Double Demon.

CHAPTER XX

'THE THIN END OF THE WEDGE'

'But yet the pity of it, Iago! O Iago, the pity of it, Iago!'—*Othello.*

'It is customary, but I think it is a mistake, to speak of happy childhood. Children are often over-anxious and acutely sensitive. Man ought to be man and master of his fate, but children are at the mercy of those about them.'—SIR JOHN LUBBOCK.

ON her return home that afternoon Valerie gave Pansy a full and explicit account of her interview with Mr. Nugent in the old curiosity shop, and when she announced her intention of calling at the Old House the very next day, Pansy nodded approval.

'It is your mission, Marmee,' she said quite solemnly, 'to mother that poor, little ill-treated child,' for Pansy took a dark and pessimistic view of the matter; neither of them detected the double meaning in the girl's innocent speech, such an idea could not have entered their heads; 'yes, it is your mission,' she repeated in a most emphatic manner.

'I wish you would go with me,' returned her stepmother, but Pansy refused to do this.

'I should not be the least help to you,' she returned decidedly; 'I never can hide it when I dislike people, and then of course they take offence; if I could only

pull down the blinds, and present a sort of blank wall countenance, as you do, my dearly-beloved Marmee, I might consent to beard the old lioness in her den,' and Valerie, who was aware of Pansy's aggressive manner to any one of whom she disapproved, did not attempt to persuade her.

She had always had a great curiosity to see the inside of the Old House. Ronald's description of the hall and library had much interested her, but before she had been in the drawing-room many minutes she would have given much to be out in the raw, damp air again, for she felt in danger of asphyxia.

The close, hot-house atmosphere, the curious odour that pervaded the room, a mixture of sandal-wood, attar of roses, and fresh Neapolitan violets, made her quite giddy. Madame Mercier was not in her usual place, and as Valerie waited for a few minutes, she had plenty of time to admire the beautiful Indian cabinets and inlaid tables. Valerie's quick eyes took note of many things,—the softly cushioned chair, and Japanese screen, and the little round table with the French novels and *bonbonnière*, the pack of Patience cards, and Madame's fairy-like web of netting, with her fan and *pince-nez* beside it.

Valerie's attention was so absorbed that Madame Mercier's noiseless footsteps over the thick rugs were unnoticed, until a slight cough roused her to the consciousness that she was no longer alone.

'A thousand pardons for keeping you waiting, Mrs. Thurston,' observed Madame in her most gracious manner; strangers always said that Madame Mercier's manners were perfect. 'I have been indisposed, and keeping my room late, and I was still engaged with my toilette when your name was brought to me.'

Valerie could hardly summon up presence of mind to reply, she was so taken aback at Madame Mercier's appearance.

She thought of Ronald's name of Madame la Chatte-Blanche, as she looked at the diminutive witch-like figure and odd picturesque head. To carry out her rôle of an invalid, Madame Mère wore a white lace hood over her fluffy curls, with a diamond butterfly fastening it under her chin ; her face was a little flushed by a recent altercation with her grand-daughter, but the hard brilliancy of her eyes, and their blue, steely light, gave Valerie a positive chill. Strange to say, her first feeling was a sensation of profound pity for Mr. Nugent, but when she thought of Philippa her heart failed her ; there was no motherhood in that smooth, unwrinkled old face ; the soul of the egoist, the worldling, and the iron-willed despot looked out of those cold eyes.

It was with some difficulty that Valerie could pull herself together, and make her apologies for her long-deferred visit. But Madame Mercier was all condescension and graciousness. Mrs. Thurston needed no excuse. She had a right to visit whom she would. Every one knew that the inhabitants of the close were exclusive, and had a society of their own. It was not for her to complain—an outsider and a foreigner, so to speak—for she was more Parisian than English.

'For myself,' went on Madame Mercier, in her smooth, honeyed tones, 'a little dulness more or less does not matter. With my poor nerves and frequent *malaises*, I am only fitted for a recluse. It is for my son-in-law—my dear Marmaduke—that I am ambitious, and desire a larger connection. A man of such intellect, such promise, ought not to be left in obscurity. If you are a student of human nature, my dear

Mrs. Thurston, you will understand that a hermit life encourages eccentricity.'

Madame Mercier was regarding her visitor with cold critical eyes as she talked. She gave her opinion of Mrs. Thurston rather freely afterwards to her favourite crony, Madame Delamotte, an old French widow, who lived at Wycombe, and whom she patronised a good deal.

'I assure you, *ma chère*, that I was quite shocked,' she remarked. 'Mrs. Thurston only lost her husband three or four months ago, and she actually wore a black bonnet and dress that any one could have worn; but for her white cuffs, no one would imagine that she was a widow.'

'*Ciel!*—what barbarism! Could any woman be so unfeeling?' returned Madame Delamotte, raising her virtuous eyes towards the ceiling, for she was a toady at heart, and took her cue from Madame Mercier.

'I confess I was disappointed in her,' went on Madame complacently; 'she is far too pale and inanimate for my taste.' But this was sheer spite on Madame's part, for she had been much struck by the pure oval of Valerie's face, and her creamy complexion, which a faint pink flush from the heat of the room heightened into positive beauty. But it was her amiable custom to disparage any one whom her son-in-law regarded with favour, and her sharp eyes soon detected that he had a high opinion of Mrs. Thurston.

To Valerie the whole visit was extremely irksome. She was not a great talker, and she found it difficult to carry on the conversation. Madame Mercier's manner might be smooth, but every now and then Valerie detected a cynical tone or suppressed sneer. Wycombe society was certainly not to her taste. It was only when

Valerie spoke of her visit to Paris in the preceding year that Madame warmed up into animation.

She became so agreeable at last that her visitor ventured to ask if she might see her little friend Philippa, but Madame Mercier stiffened at once.

'Philippa never sees visitors,' she returned coldly. 'One cannot keep an excitable, nervous child too tranquil. This is what I tell my son-in-law. I have argued the point with him again and again; but he has his opinions, and I have mine.'

'But surely, Madame Mercier,' remonstrated Valerie, 'it is not good for any one, not even a child, to be too much alone; there is danger of their growing up shy and awkward. I have taken a fancy to your little granddaughter, and should much like to see her again,' but Madame Mercier was not to be coerced.

'You are very good, my dear Mrs. Thurston, and perhaps another day, when Philippa has earned a treat; but just now she is in disgrace; a returned lesson; we must keep up discipline.' Valerie bit her lip with annoyance. She felt as though she disliked this little dressed-up irritating woman more every moment. There was insincerity in every word she spoke.

It was no use her prolonging her visit, and she had risen from her seat when, to her surprise, Mr. Nugent entered the room. He had just come in, and had seen her card. He greeted her with much cordiality, and begged her to resume her seat for a few moments, but Valerie quietly negatived this.

'I have already paid Madame Mercier a long visit,' she returned, 'and as she is an invalid I must not tire her. I am only sorry that I am not able to see little Philippa.'

'I will ring the bell, and Marthe shall send her

down,' he replied, walking across the room, but Madame Mercier's shrill tone warned him from his purpose.

'Please do nothing of the kind, Duke,' she said irritably. 'My head will not bear noise to-day; besides, Philippa is under discipline; she has been idle, and her lessons are badly learnt. I told her they must be repeated to Marthe before tea.' But Mr. Nugent took not the slightest notice of this speech; he only turned to Mrs. Thurston:

'Would you like to go upstairs and see her?' he asked. And as Valerie naturally hesitated, and looked at Madame Mercier as though for permission, he said hastily:

'If your head is bad, Madame Mère, it will be far better for Mrs. Thurston to see Philippa upstairs. Don't trouble about her lessons, she shall repeat them to me'; and actually, before Madame Mercier could utter a remonstrance, he was opening the door for Mrs. Thurston to precede him.

Valerie felt very guilty as she followed him upstairs. She felt sure that Madame Mercier would resent her visit to the nursery.

They found Philippa on the rug as usual, burning her poor little face in the attempt to learn her lessons by the fire-light. Marthe had declined to light the candles until tea-time. The child uttered a cry of joy at the sight of her friend. As Mr. Nugent dismissed Marthe, Valerie seated herself in the low rocking-chair, and took the little girl on her lap. A delicious half-hour followed. The lessons were repeated without fault; and then all Philippa's treasures were produced—her dolls, and the new furniture for the doll-house, with all the little things hoarded and cherished by the lonely child.

Valerie quite forgot Madame Mercier's severe face

as she helped Philippa arrange the furniture in the new doll-house, and promised to make curtains and quilts for the minute beds.

'Oh, how nice it is to have a lady playfellow, isn't it, father?' exclaimed Phil in a voice breathless from satisfaction. 'Marthe said she could not be bothered to make those curtains, and I did want them so badly.'

'Then you shall have them, dear,' returned Valerie in her winning way. 'I have a piece of pretty rose-coloured silk that will look just lovely'; then, as Phil clapped her hands with delight, Valerie saw a dark blue bruise across the poor little knuckles. 'Have you hurt yourself, darling?' she asked, quite shocked, but Phil grew very red, and twisted her hand away.

'Oh no, it is nothing,' and she would have said no more, only Mr. Nugent's suspicion was roused by the pity in Valerie's eyes.

'Phil,' he said rather sternly, 'tell me directly how you got such a bruise on your hand'; then Philippa's eyes were full of tears in a moment.

'Gran was angry with me because I learnt my lessons badly, and the ruler hit harder than usual, it does sting so,' and Philippa's lip trembled; 'and when I cried, Gran boxed my ears and told me to go up-stairs.'

Philippa spoke without resentment, as though hard raps came in the day's routine. Over the child's head Mr. Nugent's eyes encountered Valerie's—they spoke volumes; then he stooped and kissed the little bruised hand very tenderly. 'Poor little Phil, my poor little girl,' he said, and Phil gave him a sweet surprised smile.

'Why, father,' she said, 'I don't mind so much as all that, and it has quite left off aching now,' and then Valerie put her down very gently.

'I must go now, little one,' she said, with one of the motherly looks that had won Phil's heart. 'Ronald shall bring the curtains directly they are ready, and then you can have a grand house-warming.'

But Valerie's manner changed directly they were outside the door; she was evidently in no mood for speech, for she walked quickly towards the head of the staircase, and Mr. Nugent had to call to her to stop.

'Mrs. Thurston, will you not wait a moment? I must speak to you.' Then to his distress he saw that her eyes were filled with tears.

'Oh, not here,' she said hastily. 'I cannot talk here'; then, in a voice that thrilled him with its sad earnestness, 'Mr. Nugent, you are her father—can you stand by and see such things done to a little child? She looks ill to-night; if you are not careful she will soon be on a sick-bed.'

'Yes, I know, you may trust me,' he returned in a low voice, and then the sound of footsteps made him draw back.

It was Madame Mercier, in her lace hood, with a white cashmere shawl draped round her to protect her from the draught of the passage. She looked at them keenly as they passed her, but Valerie only bowed and went on. Mr. Nugent did not appear to see her. Madame Mercier dropped a vindictive little curtsey as she looked after them.

'So you have had your way, my fine Madame,' she muttered, 'but for the future you will have to reckon with me. If you think to get a footing at the Old House you are much mistaken. I will have no spies and informers about me'; and Madame Mercier determined that no persuasion on her son-in-law's part should induce her to return Mrs. Thurston's visit.

Pansy had never seen her step-mother so distressed as she was that evening; she broke down as she described the scene in the nursery, and for once her tears flowed freely.

'That little scarred hand will haunt me,' she said; and Ronald, who was present, doubled up his fists and said he should like to knock down old Madame la Chatte-Blanche. 'And Marthe should have her turn too,' he added grimly; 'what a pair of brutes they are!'

'Marmee, what will Mr. Nugent do?' asked Pansy in a horrified tone. 'Did he look very angry?'

'Yes, he is angry; and there was trouble in his face, but it is difficult for him to act. I can see that men have less moral courage than women. I am sure of that. If I were in Mr. Nugent's place, I would not sleep until I had put things on a different footing. Either Madame Mercier or Philippa ought to be sent away from the Old House, or I will not answer for the consequences. There is a look in the child's eyes as though her nerves were affected, she is highly strung and exceedingly sensitive; and those women treat her barbarously'; and then Valerie sighed and went upstairs, as though any further talk would be intolerable to her.

She would have been more comforted if she could have read Mr. Nugent's thoughts that evening, as he sat in his solitary study. To his great relief he had dined alone. Madame Mercier was nursing her cold in her own room.

How was he to rescue his motherless child from her grandmother's oppressive tyranny?—this was the problem that kept him sleepless for hours, but the only resolution at which he arrived that night was that there should be no more lessons with Madame Mère, he would put a stop to knuckle-rapping for ever.

In his present mood he could not trust himself to speak to his mother-in-law until his plans were matured. It would be better to have no quarrel ; he knew Madame Mercier well enough to be sure that she would wax dangerous if provoked, and then she might wreak her vengeance on Phil's innocent head. For a few days he must employ finesse and strategy, he was formulating a scheme in which he would need Mrs. Thurston's advice and co-operation ; if possible, he would speak to her on the subject the next day, and when he had made up his mind on this subject, he wrote a short note and gave orders that it should be sent up on Madame Mercier's breakfast tray. He had written as follows. The note had neither beginning nor end :—

'I have made up my mind for the future to take Philippa's education into my own hands, and until term begins she will bring her lessons to me every morning. This is only a temporary arrangement, but it is necessary for me to form some estimate of her capabilities, and, as you know, I have a passion for tuition. It is my intention to find a good governess for her, who will come for a few hours daily, and in that case Marthe's services will no longer be required. You may as well prepare her for this.'

'I shall do nothing of the kind,' muttered Madame, raising herself on the pillow, and tearing the note into little bits. 'That woman has put it into his head. Those silent, quiet women are always deep. It is the thin end of the wedge, my dear Marmaduke. Get rid of Marthe! a daily governess! That little fool of a child must have been whining to him. I am sure of it. I lost my temper, I own it, and the ruler slipped ; it was my nerves ; but I must teach her not to complain of my just discipline. She must be warned and

threatened,' and Madame Mercier sat up in bed,—a grim-looking old woman, in spite of her frills and laced nightcap,—and rang her bell loudly. Marthe answered it.

'Will you send Miss Philippa to me at once?' she said peremptorily, but Marthe only grinned in her stolid manner.

'The little Meess is not in the nursery, Madame,' she returned. 'Monsieur sent word that she was to breakfast with him in the library. She has taken her slate and her lesson-books; and she, Marthe, had orders to take down her walking things at eleven o'clock.'

'Very well, you may go,' returned Madame Mercier pettishly. 'If you were not such a fool, Marthe, you would have given me a hint of this an hour ago, but how is one to expect wisdom from such a woodenhead?' But there was an unpleasant look in Madame Mercier's eyes as she lay back on her pillows. She was foiled—she knew it well; for that day at least the victim of her tyranny was safe under her father's wing.

CHAPTER XXI

MADAME MÈRE IS FOILED

'Be sure of it; give me the ocular proof;
. . . no hinge nor loop
To hang a doubt on.'—*Othello.*

'Not so sick, my lord,
As she is troubled with thick-coming fancies,
That keep her from her rest.'—*Macbeth.*

AFTER all Mr. Nugent was unable to pay his projected visit to Roadside. Ronald came, while they were still at breakfast, with a little parcel for Philippa from his mother. She was to spend the day at the Deanery, he informed them. Mrs. Walcott had a bad cold, and was confined to the house, and his mother had promised to keep her company; and then Philippa interrupted him with her exclamations of delight. The rose-coloured curtains and lace-trimmed quilts were fit for Titania's use. Pansy had amused herself with embroidering some tiny cambric sheets she had contrived out of an old handkerchief; there were even pillow-slips, with minute frills. Ronald looked on curiously, while Phil held up each fairy-like article for her father's inspection.

'I do love that dear Mrs. Thurston,' she said again and again. 'She is the kindest and best lady I have

ever seen in my life,' but it must be owned that Phil's list of acquaintance was singularly circumscribed, as Mrs. Thurston and Ronald were her only friends out of her family circle.

The day was unusually bright and fine, and Mr. Nugent thought that a ride on Ladybird would be beneficial, so Ronald started off for the stables, while Marthe, who looked exceedingly glum, got Philippa ready. As her master's eye was upon her, she was obliged to perform her task in silence, but her rough, ungracious manners, and her utter want of gentleness with the child, were sufficiently patent to him.

Madame, peeping from behind her curtains, saw the little cavalcade set forth—Philippa, in her furred coat and velvet hat, sitting proudly erect on Ladybird, with Ronald running beside her, and Mr. Nugent following them; the little picture, the gaiety, the brightness moved her to envious wrath.

'He has taken the bit between his teeth with a vengeance,' she thought. 'How dare he contradict her orders in this audacious fashion! The child had a cold, and was to be kept in the nursery—she had told Marthe so herself, and there she was, cantering off on her pony. Well, he had flung down the gauntlet,' and here Madame shrugged her shoulders with infinite meaning, 'and she would not be slow to take it up. You will repent this, Marmaduke,' she said, as she got back into bed, and arranged herself comfortably. 'If you choose to quarrel with me you must take the consequences,' and then Madame, who had a headache, composed herself for a nap.

Ronald came back with them to luncheon, and spent the whole afternoon in the nursery. Mr. Nugent had begged him to remain. He had an engagement that

would take him from home until late in the evening, and to the boy's secret surprise he made him promise to stay until his return. Ronald wanted to go back to Pansy, but he was too good-natured to refuse, so he sat by the fire and read the *Arabian Nights*, while Philippa arranged her curtains and put her doll-house in order; then they played draughts and dominoes until tea-time. Ronald did not much enjoy his tea. Mrs. Foster, the cook, had sent up a freshly-baked cake and some of her best marmalade in honour of Philippa's visitor, but Marthe refused to allow her charge to partake of either delicacy. 'The little Meess had her bread and milk,' she said crossly, 'and Madame never allowed her to have such sweet things; it was contrary to rules,' and so on. Ronald kicked savagely under the table. He saw that Marthe had a spiteful pleasure in thwarting them. Then he hit on an expedient. He broke off choice morsels of the cake, and passed them skilfully into Phil's hand under the table-cloth. It was as good as a game, Philippa thought, and before tea had ended she had had her fair share of cake.

'I wonder if all English young gentlemen have your appetite, Monsieur Ronald,' observed Marthe as she looked at the cake, but Ronald only laughed in her face.

They had a game of romps after tea, but this was an error of judgment on Ronald's part, for the noise brought up Madame in her dressing-gown and cashmere shawl.

Her look of disgust on seeing him was sufficiently eloquent. 'You here still!' she said in a voice that made Ronald grow hot to his very ears, but he answered her boldly:

'I have been here all day. Mr. Nugent invited me. We have had splendid fun; haven't we, Phil? He told me to stay until he came back,' went

on the lad, but it would have been wiser if he had kept this to himself.

'Oh, indeed!' muttered Madame dryly; 'well, as Philippa is going to bed now, perhaps you will be good enough to go downstairs.'

'It is not my bed-time yet, Gran,' exclaimed Phil piteously, but Madame only pointed to the door. 'Go in there until Marthe comes; you know I never allow such noise and disturbance—go this instant, Philippa,' and as the poor little thing hesitated, she took her by the arm and remorselessly closed the door.

'Horrid old cat,' muttered Ronald as he went down to the library; but as it was no use his waiting any longer, he left a note for Mr. Nugent. 'Madame Mercier has turned me out of the nursery,' he wrote, 'so I may as well go home, as it is only six o'clock.' But Mr. Nugent, who had been unexpectedly detained, did not read this note until three hours later.

Phil hated going to bed, and her poor little arm was black and blue where her grandmother's grip had been; but as Marthe had left the door open, she lay feelingly tolerably contented, thinking of Ronald and her doll-house, and she had fallen asleep before Marthe went down to her supper.

Mr. Nugent was tired and hungry when he got back, and as his meal was waiting for him, he thought he would have it before he went up to Philippa. He could not have rested comfortably without ascertaining for himself that she was sleeping quietly.

It was therefore much later than usual when he went upstairs, and he was somewhat surprised to see Madame Mercier in her dressing-gown and shawl go into the nursery before him. She had been in her room all day nursing her cold, and he could not understand her

errand at this late hour; the next moment he heard the inner door slammed violently, and then Philippa's voice sounded as though she were startled.

He stood still for a moment; he was determined to know more. Then he heard the child's tones of entreaty. 'Oh, Gran! dear Gran! do please open the door again. I am not naughty, I was fast asleep; but the darkness makes me feel so bad—oh, Gran!'

'Hold your tongue, Philippa,' interrupted Madame Mercier harshly, 'stuff and rubbish about the darkness; only naughty children are afraid because they have done wrong. I am going to shut the door, and lock it too, for you are not to be trusted.'

Then Philippa sprang from her bed with a shrill scream. 'Oh no, Gran! you cannot be so cruel. I cannot be locked in with Mother Peak—oh, father, father,' in agonised tones, 'where are you?' But she had no need to ask this question, for as Madame Mercier came out of the bedroom she found herself face to face with Marmaduke.

For the instant she recoiled, and even her courage quailed beneath his look of anger and contempt. She had gone too far; she must conciliate him.

'I would not have done it, Duke,' she said with a shrill little laugh; 'it was only a threat on my part—it is no lie, it is the truth,' she continued anxiously. 'I never meant to lock her in.' But his only answer was to wave her away. 'Go!' was the one word that escaped his lips, and for once in her life Madame Mercier was frightened into obedience.

When Mr. Nugent described this scene to Mrs. Thurston afterwards, he found to his surprise that she took a more lenient view of Madame Mercier's conduct than he did. 'If I had not been there she would

have locked the door, and the child would have had brain fever,' he said; but Valerie did not agree with him.

'I think not,' she said gently. 'She has a cruel nature, and she meant to frighten the child, but it was a mere threat, you may depend on that.' And, strange to say, Valerie was right. Madame would have turned the key round in another moment; she had worked on the child's fears, and she was satisfied; but she was not the absolute fiend that her son-in-law believed her to be.

Mr. Nugent's first task was to soothe Philippa; she seemed almost beside herself with terror. The startled waking from sleep, the thought that she and Mother Peak and Co. were to be locked up together, had nearly thrown her into a fit. 'Don't let her do it, father,' she said over and over again; 'don't let her ever do it, or Mother Peak will kill me,' and no words or caresses seemed to have any effect. He wrapped her up at last and carried her down to the library, as he had done on another occasion, and when she was a little warmer and her teeth had ceased to chatter, he induced her to take some hot wine and water. 'Gran wouldn't really have done it, Phil, you know,' he said with forced cheerfulness; but the lie, as he thought it, stuck in his throat. He saw that Phil did not believe him.

'Gran does not love me a bit,' she said in a weak quavering voice, 'or she would not punish me so often. Why does she hate me, father; I try very hard to be good?' but Mr. Nugent could only press the fair little head closer to him. He realised now how dear his only child was to him, and he cursed himself for his blindness in leaving her to the tender mercies of two such women.

As soon as he could leave her for a moment he rang the bell, and desired that Emma should be sent to him. Emma was the new housemaid, and she had only been a week at the Old House; but Mr. Nugent, who had once given her an order, had been struck by the girl's honest, good-tempered face, and he thought he could trust her. She came at once, and received her master's instructions. There was a bed in his dressing-room. Emma was to bring down Miss Philippa's mattress and bed-clothes. Miss Philippa was not well, and he wished to have her near him; there must be a night-light, and everything ready for use. He thought the girl looked at him a little oddly, but she made no remark. A few minutes later, as he sat talking to the child, there was a knock at the door, and Emma, with a troubled look on her round face, beckoned him into the passage.

'Oh, if you please, sir, will you kindly tell me what I am to do. Marthe will not let me make up the bed. She has carried up the things again into the night-nursery, and it is no use at all my telling her that it is the master's order.'

'I will see to it, Emma—do as I told you.' 'I am only going to leave you for a minute, Phil darling,' as the child called to him, and then he hurried up to the nursery. He found Marthe stolidly remaking the bed, and even when he spoke to her she did not desist from her occupation.

'What are you doing, Marthe?' he asked angrily. 'How dare you interfere with my orders to Emma.'

'Emma has nothing to do with my nursery, Monsieur,' returned Marthe sulkily; 'it is for me to make Meess Philippa's bed. She is my charge, not Emma's.'

'Then she is no longer your charge, please to understand that. I do not wish to retain you any longer in my service. You may remain your month if you have nowhere else to go, but as long as you are in the nursery, Miss Philippa will not enter it. Neither shall I allow you to touch her again. Do your work, Emma,' and then, without another word, he waited until the girl had taken all she wanted. Marthe was too much crushed by her master's unexpected firmness to offer any more opposition.

He had spoken loudly, and Madame Mercier, wandering up and down the passage in her velvet slippers as noiselessly as a belated ghost, overheard every word, and slunk into her room with a scared face at the sound of his footsteps. For the first time in her selfish, self-indulgent life, remorse seized her.

'Marthe has got her dismissal,' she muttered, 'and if I am not careful I shall get mine too. When Marmaduke is roused one can do nothing with him. What a fool I was to lose my temper and threaten the little monkey. But he had crossed me, and that made me irritable. I must keep my room for a day or two'; and then Madame Mercier made up her mind that she would send for Dr. Franklin the next morning. Marmaduke's pity must be aroused. She would write a penitent little note and explain that she was ill, and beg him to forgive her petulance. Madame was quite content to humble herself in the dust until the storm had passed over. 'You must not be angry with an old woman—the mother of your poor Louise,' that was what she would say to him. And when she had laid her plans to her own satisfaction, Madame Mère retired to rest.

Philippa had given a wan little smile when Emma

told her that she was going to sleep in her father's dressing-room. Mr. Nugent carried her up himself. The little room looked as snug as possible, but Phil was almost too tired to notice anything.

'Father says he is coming up to bed directly, and that he means to put the door wide open,' she said drowsily as Emma tucked her up, with a kiss; and the sense of protection and comfort was so great that the weary child soon slept.

Mr. Nugent was long in following her example; more than once he stole into the dressing-room. After the first, Philippa seemed restless and moved uneasily, then she talked disconnectedly in her sleep. Mr. Nugent listened to the broken sentences with feelings bordering on anguish. 'Don't Gran,' she once said, 'it all goes out of my head, and I knew it so perfectly—and it does hurt so.' And again, 'Marthe boxes my ears when she is cross—but I was not naughty. She gave me a hard push and I fell down and knocked my head against the floor. It made me feel so sick.'

And another time, as he was just sinking off to sleep, he heard a suppressed shriek and hurried to her. She was fast asleep and evidently in the throes of nightmare. 'Mother Peak is after me, Gran has locked us up together,' he heard her mutter. When he woke her up her forehead was wet and clammy with perspiration. Cold as it was, he had to sit beside her for an hour.

Madame Mercier carried out her programme and sent for Dr. Franklin at an early hour, but to her disgust Marmaduke waylaid him and carried him off to the library. Dr. Franklin looked a little grave after he had carefully examined the child. He had a warm corner in his heart for children, and his indignation was

strongly excited by Mr. Nugent's account of Madame Mère's mode of education.

'It is high time that you found things out for yourself,' he said gruffly, 'for he secretly thought Mr. Nugent was to blame for such culpable blindness; 'the child is on the brink of nervous illness. I am doubtful whether we shall save her from brain fever. My advice to you is, let her have instant change of scene and fresh faces round her. I need not say that Madame Mercier or the *bonne* must not be allowed even to see her.'

'I perfectly agree with you, and I will see what is to be done,' was the answer, and then, when Dr. Franklin went up to his second patient, Mr. Nugent gave Emma instructions to remain with the child and to let no one enter the room during his absence, and then he set off to Roadside. Dr. Franklin was not to be cajoled by Madame's fancies and blandishments. He pooh-poohed her list of ailments, and told her curtly that there was nothing the matter with her.

'You have a cold, and have lived too well. You should diet yourself and take more exercise.' Madame Mercier was furious with him. 'You can keep your room for a couple of days and then you will be all right.'

'He is a brute. I will have Dr. Carstairs next time,' Madame said to herself as she heard him tramping down the stairs, and she was far too angry to write her penitent note.

Mrs. Thurston and Pansy were sitting at work in the little dining-room. When they caught sight of Mr. Nugent, Pansy put her work together and jumped up.

'He has come to talk to you about the child, Marmee,' she said, 'and it will be easier for him to

speak to you alone,' and as Valerie agreed with her, Pansy vanished in the most obliging way.

When Mr. Nugent entered the room Valerie put out her hand to him without a word; one glance at his face told her that much had happened since they last met. He looked years older, and quite worn and troubled.

'Mrs. Thurston,' he said abruptly, 'the crisis has come, and I am going to ask you to help me. In all Wycombe there is no friend to whom I can turn at this moment. My little girl is ill. Dr. Franklin says she is on the brink of a nervous breakdown, and that she must be sent away from the Old House at once. May I send her to you for a week or two until I can make my plans.'

Valerie's full bright smile in answer was like sunshine, it warmed him through and through. 'Poor little darling—yes, indeed,' was her ready reply. 'Pansy and I will be so pleased to have her, and we will take such care of her. Mr. Nugent, indeed, this is very kind and friendly of you. I am quite grateful to you for thinking of this.' Valerie's charming manner was setting him at his ease, it was as though he was doing her a favour.

'You are too good,' he returned in a low voice; 'but it is Phil's only chance, I am sure of that. And now, will you tell me one other thing? How soon can you be ready for her?'

Valerie considered a moment, then she said smiling: 'It is hardly eleven yet. Suppose you bring her in about an hour and a half's time, we shall be quite ready for her by then.' And as Mr. Nugent looked at her incredulously, as though he hardly ventured to believe his own ears, she explained to him that her arrangements

would be so simple that they could easily be carried out in an hour.

'Philippa will be in my room,' she said; 'there is a small bed in the loft that we brought with us in case of illness, and I will have it placed beside mine, and then I can watch over her. Oh, please, don't thank me,' as he seemed about to interrupt her, 'I shall love to have her. It is such a strange coincidence,' she went on. 'This very morning Pansy and I were making plans over our work. You see it will be necessary to add to our small income, and I was actually going to advertise for a child to-day, but I am glad you came in time to stop me.'

'To advertise for a child!' he exclaimed in great surprise. He knew Mrs. Thurston was poor, but he never imagined that she would be compelled to do this.

'Yes, but why do you look so shocked, Mr. Nugent? 'Pansy and I love children, she is so fond of teaching them, and I should do all the mothering.'

'I do not doubt it,' but Marmaduke's voice was a little choked. 'Mrs. Thurston, it was kind of you to tell me this, will you—will you add to your goodness, and let my little Philippa be the child you intend to mother? I will pay any terms you like to ask; you shall have your own way with her, and I will only ask to see her as often as possible. Dear lady, for my poor little girl's sake, I beg you not to refuse me,' and Mr. Nugent spoke with some agitation.

CHAPTER XXII

CHANGES AT THE OLD HOUSE

'Diseases, desperate grown
By desperate appliance are relieved,
Or not at all.'—*Hamlet.*

'I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him.'
The Merchant of Venice.

VALERIE owned afterwards to Pansy that Mr. Nugent's impetuosity had almost taken away her breath.

'He is very masterful,' she continued thoughtfully; 'one would not think it from his quiet manners. I expect he is not easily roused, but when he once gets an idea in his head it just sticks. He offered me outrageous terms for the child's maintenance, and I could not bring him to reason. He was on the point of taking offence, until I suggested that Mrs. Walcott should be the arbiter, and we have mutually agreed to abide by her decision.'

'Poor Marmee, you look quite hot and flurried,' returned Pansy sympathetically; 'but I like Mr. Nugent all the better for being masterful. Well, my words have come true, and it is your mission to mother Philippa. It is an ill wind that blows no one any good, and this will help to feather our nest comfort-

ably,' and then they went upstairs to make their preparation.

They were all in readiness when the fly with Phil's neat little trunk on the roof drew up before Roadside. Valerie was at the open door as Mr. Nugent lifted Phil out, but as she held out her arms to her little guest she could have wept with pity. The child looked as though she had passed through an illness. Her face seemed smaller and thinner, and her eyes were unnaturally large and bright. She was almost too languid to notice her new surroundings, but lay on the couch where Valerie had placed her with a dazed, wistful expression.

'She does not look fit for much, does she,' observed Mr. Nugent in a low tone; but he looked anxiously at Mrs. Thurston as he spoke.

'Phil is tired and must rest,' she returned aloud in a cheery voice, that was intended for the child's benefit. 'We don't mean to let Ronald talk to her to-day. Even the best of boys are noisy.' Then at the mention of her play-fellow Phil smiled faintly.

Mr. Nugent stood by the couch; he seemed as though he could hardly tear himself away. When Valerie suggested that he should look in later, he gave her a glance expressive of gratitude; her thoughtfulness touched him to the heart.

Tea was over when he paid his third visit that day to Roadside. He found Valerie alone with the child. She was still on the couch, propped up with pillows, and Valerie was on a low chair beside her with some minute work on her lap that looked like a doll's frock.

'Baby is to be short-coated,' she said gravely; 'so Pansy and I are very busy.' Mr. Nugent looked somewhat mystified.

'Mrs. Thurston means my baby, father,' explained

Phil with a weak little laugh that was like music to his ears. 'May I tell him, Mrs. Thurston'; and, as Valerie nodded: 'Father, do you know I am going to sleep in Mrs. Thurston's own room, and that I have a dear little bed—close to hers—so close that I can touch her. Oh, there is more than that,' as he was about to counterfeit intense surprise; 'she is going to sit with me until I go to sleep, because she says I may feel strange at first.'

'Mrs. Thurston is very good to us both, Phil,' he returned quickly, and then Valerie went out of the room and left them together.

Valerie did not disguise from herself or Pansy that she had undertaken a very heavy responsibility, and that night she hardly slept at all.

Phil was restless, and moaned and talked in her sleep without intermission. Every now and then she seemed to start from an uneasy dream. Valerie at last took her into her own bed, and let her nestle against her, and a little before dawn they both slept peacefully. Nothing could be more judicious and tender than her treatment of the child. She or Pansy were constantly with her. Ronald was only admitted for a brief half hour. Phil was quite content with her grown-up playfellows. She would lie on her couch watching Pansy with languid interest as she dressed the baby doll in its new garments, or listened to some simple story that Valerie read to her.

'You have to thank Mrs. Thurston that my patient has escaped brain fever,' observed Dr. Franklin later on to Mr. Nugent. 'It was touch and go at one time, I can tell you. That woman is a nurse by instinct; she is worth her weight in gold in a sick-room, and Miss Pansy takes after her. You may not know it—for neither of

them are likely to tell—that for more than a week Mrs. Thurston did not have a good night's rest. Miss Pansy got quite worried about it at last.'

'Good heavens, Franklin, you don't say so!' and Mr. Nugent looked quite shocked. These sleepless nights were the reason why Mrs. Thurston had looked so worn and pale — he had noticed it more than once, and had asked her a little anxiously if she were well.

'Oh, I am always well: I am very strong,' she had assured him, and he had not ventured to say more. He was not a shy man; he could hold his own with most people; but though Mrs. Thurston was perfectly kind and friendly, he could not feel that he made much way with her; he could not divest himself of the idea that she had laid down certain limitations in their intercourse which she expected him to keep—'Thus far and no farther,' seemed written up as a warning if he trespassed in the least. Pansy was far more frank and confidential with him; she jested with him, talked to him in a girlish light-hearted way, and always seemed pleased to see him, though she told him that he was far too big for the Roadside Caravan.

'I have only just got used to the box-like dimensions of Scylla and Charybdis myself,' she observed one day. 'The first week I got quite mixed. I thought I was playing with my dear old Noah's ark—without the animals—and that I was trying to push Mrs. Shem and Mrs. Ham through the little door. Oh dear! I thought I should have been smothered.'

Mr. Nugent laughed — he found Pansy decidedly amusing; then he said quite seriously, as though he had made a new discovery: 'It is not a large house, of course; but in my opinion it is delightfully cosy; it

is a real home-nest.' Then Pansy looked at him a little curiously.

But he really meant it; and as he sat in his solitary library in the evening, he would think longingly of the bright little sitting-room at Roadside. Term had begun, and he was hard at work with his classes, so his visits were generally paid in the afternoon. Valerie was not always there, or now and then Pansy's place would be vacant. Occasionally he dropped in at tea-time, and then he was always made welcome. Pansy would put the glass screen between him and the fire, and give him a stand for his cup and plate, while Phil fussed about him and plied him with good things.

'Father does love to have me wait on him,' she whispered to Valerie. 'May I make him a piece of toast all by myself?'

The little homely scene would haunt Marmaduke as he walked home through the darkness; he wondered why he had enjoyed himself so much; he could not remember that Mrs. Thurston had spoken a dozen words to him; she had sat at her little tea-table silent and absorbed, while Pansy and Phil chattered to him; but he had noticed the grace of her attitude, and the pure oval of her profile. 'She is beautiful; but it is not her beauty that is the charm,' he said to himself as he sat by his lonely fireside.

Phil was beginning to look like herself again, a little bleached and dwindled perhaps—a pale, shadowy Phil; but Dr. Franklin expressed himself as fully satisfied with her condition.

'When the weather gets warmer Mrs. Thurston must take her to the seaside,' he remarked; 'she must run about and pick up shells, and dabble in the sea water and get strong'; and then he forbade all lessons,

and by his advice Ladybird came round daily. Sometimes, when Mr. Nugent had a free afternoon, he accompanied her or took her and Pansy for a long drive. He had invited Valerie once, but she had made some excuse, and he had never asked her again. Pansy was a little bored by the drives, but her step-mother begged her not to refuse.

Now and then Valerie would take upon herself to give Mr. Nugent a quiet hint. One day, when she found herself alone with him for a few minutes, she said a little gravely: 'Philippa does not seem quite so bright to-day. I am sure something is on her little mind. This morning, as I was helping her to dress, I noticed her face changed, and when I questioned her, she said she was thinking how Marthe hurt her when she combed her hair; "she seemed quite angry if my hair tangled,"—she actually said that. I am sure it would relieve her mind if you told her Marthe had left you'; and Mr. Nugent acted on this advice when he took Philippa for her ride. Phil's eyes opened widely with astonishment when she heard the news.

'Marthe has really gone; she will never, never dress or undress me again; oh, father, dear, I am glad,' and Phil drew a deep breath of satisfaction. Valerie had been right in her surmise; the thought of her gloomy nursery at the Old House, and her grim, taciturn *bonne*, had haunted the child even in her happiest moments.

'Emma will look after you when you come back,' continued Mr. Nugent; 'you will like that, Phil.'

'Oh yes — yes!' returned the child excitedly. 'Emma is such a nice, kind girl. Do you know, father, she actually kissed me when she tucked me up. Marthe never kissed me once'; and then an

anxious look came into Phil's face. 'Doesn't Gran mind Marthe going away?' But Mr. Nugent did not appear to hear this question; he asked Phil if she would not like to canter to the end of the road, and then he started Ladybird off. All things were in a state of transition at the Old House, and it would be better for the child to remain in ignorance until they were finally settled.

Madame Mercier had remained in her room for about a week after Philippa's departure: vexation of mind, and inward rage at her baffled schemes, had made her really indisposed, and Dr. Carstairs had been in constant attendance, much to Marmaduke's disgust, for he disliked the man—he was pompous, and too much inclined to pander to his patient's fancies. The penitent letter had never been written. Madame Mercier was clever enough to know that no protestations on her part would avail her. Marmaduke's avoidance of her, his absolute silence—for not even an inquiry after her health had reached her, showed her plainly that the breach between them was likely to be a wide one.

When Marthe told her sullenly that the child had been removed, a grey tinge had come into Madame Mercier's face; it was no use her playing a losing game when the winning cards were in Marmaduke's hands; but when Marthe had left her she shed a few hot tears. She was a miserable, ill-used old woman, she thought; every one was against her, no one wanted her; if she died the next moment no one would regret her; and the hard old face, framed in its lace hood, looked pinched and drawn.

When ten days had passed, and Madame was well enough to spend a few hours in the drawing-

room, Marmaduke sent a civil message by a servant: he wished to know if Madame Mercier were well enough to receive him, as he desired to speak to her. Madame Mère returned a somewhat ungracious reply: 'Tell your master he can please himself; he will find me here'; but Madame used her smelling salts, as though her nerves were hardly in order. Mr. Nugent had braced himself for the interview; he knew exactly what to say—there should be no accusations, no reproaches; but he must make her understand that his house could no longer be her home. After all, she was Louise's mother, and an old woman; and though she had wrought him deadly harm, it was not for him to judge her.

Madame Mercier eyed him furtively as he advanced into the room, and wished her 'good afternoon.'

'I trust that your cold is better,' he observed frigidly.

Madame Mercier gave a sharp little laugh. 'I have not been overwhelmed with your kind attentions during my illness; you are rather late in your inquiries, Marmaduke.'

'Very possibly I am,' he returned composedly, 'but all the same I kept myself informed of your progress. I wished to see you to-day, Madame Mercier, as I had a little business to talk over with you.'

'Indeed!' she replied with a sneer, but he took no notice of this exclamation.

'You are doubtless aware that Marthe goes back to Antwerp to-morrow. I have paid her wages and taken her passage for her'; but Madame Mercier remained silent.

'I have now to tell you that the Old House can no longer be your home. I will say little of your cruel treatment of my poor child, but it is not possible for

me to forget it. If I had not taken her away, if I had suffered her to remain even a few hours longer in your care, she would have had brain fever; Dr. Franklin told me so himself.'

'Pooh, nonsense! Dr. Franklin is an old woman,' returned Madame Mercier angrily, but she could not meet her son-in-law's eyes. 'I suppose you are going to marry again; that is why you are so anxious to get rid of me.'

'You know very well that no such intention has entered my mind at present,' he returned sternly. 'Whether I ever marry again or not is a question for the future to solve; but under no circumstances can I permit you to remain as mistress of my house.'

'And if I refuse to go,' with a disagreeable mocking look.

'I think you will not refuse,' he returned in a steady tone; 'the Old House will not be a very desirable abode. Philippa will not return to it as long as you are here; and I have already given orders for my meals to be served to me in the library, for I will never sit or eat with you again.

It was a bitter pill for the proud tyrannical old woman to swallow; and perhaps with her undisciplined nature, and under the circumstances, it was hardly a wonder that she gave vent to her uncontrollable temper. Marmaduke stood on the rug with folded arms and a face set like iron, as Madame Mercier raged at him in a perfect fury of impotent baffled wrath. The servants crept to the door with scared faces as Madame's shrill tones reached them. The butler, Randall, shrugged his shoulders. 'These Frenchwomen are like devils when they are in a temper,' he muttered; and indeed no fishwife out of Billingsgate could have surpassed

Madame Mère in her wealth of vituperation. Mr. Nugent uttered no word, but his disgust was profound; at last he saw Madame Mère in her true colours—a coarse-minded virago and tyrant. When she paused from sheer want of breath, he went on with his subject as though she had not spoken.

'I am quite sure that you will be happier in your flat at Paris—it was a pity you ever left it—our English ways are not to your taste. I shall, of course, make you an allowance; it is not likely that my wife's mother will be permitted to starve. It will be paid through my lawyer, and the only condition I shall make is, that you never try to communicate with me personally.'

He looked at her as he spoke, and in spite of herself Madame Mercier winced under that scathing glance. 'When we part—you and I—it will be for ever; nothing will induce me to cross your path again. If you infringe in the least on the condition I have laid down, your allowance will be withdrawn. I owe you no duty, Madame Mercier; there is no need to say more. I shall be glad if you will make your preparations as speedily as possible—Madame Delamotte will doubtless assist you—and until then I shall take the management of the house into my own hands'; and then without another word he left her.

When Madame Mercier recovered her temper a little, she soon became reconciled to her doom. Her life at the Old House would be little else than solitary confinement, she thought. Her meals would be taken alone—Marmaduke would never come near her, and the servants, who one and all disliked her, would refuse to obey her orders. Her flat in Paris would be far preferable to this—she had hosts of friends, and as

Marmaduke had made her a sufficient allowance, she could live in comfort. She sent for Madame Delamotte the next day, and unfolded her plans to her, and then the two secretly worked together, spending whole days in packing up Madame Mère's cherished possessions. Madame Delamotte was to accompany her to Paris, and would probably remain with her: life without some victim on whom to exercise her tyranny was not possible to Madame, and perhaps it was as well that her chosen companion was not specially thin-skinned.

One afternoon when Marmaduke returned from a long drive with Philippa, he found to his astonishment that Madame Mercier had gone, taking all her luggage with her.

'There were two cabs laden,' Randall told him, 'and Madame Delamotte was with her. No; she left no message, sir, except that I was to tell you she was gone.'

Marmaduke asked no more questions. When the man had left him he went through the empty rooms; they looked strangely bare and denuded of ornament —Madame Mère had taken everything that was portable. Marmaduke's first act was to open all the windows; then he went upstairs into the bedroom. He found Emma standing at the foot of the bed, transfixed with consternation.

'If you please, sir,' she exclaimed breathlessly, 'Madame has taken all the curtains, and the bedspread, and the satin foot-quilt—and some of the sheets are gone too.'

'Never mind, Emma,' he returned hastily, 'Madame Mercier is welcome to all she has taken, so none of you need trouble about that'; but Emma withdrew only half-consoled.

'Madame is no better than a thief,' she said indignantly to her fellow-servants; 'the sheets and things belonged to master, and were marked with his name; he could send her to prison, that he could. I do hate such crooked, underhand ways.'

Perhaps Marmaduke in his heart hated them too. He found to his dismay that Madame Mère had left him all her bills to settle. He had always given her a good allowance, but her dressmaker's and milliner's account had not been settled for two or three years. He could not well refuse to pay them without making a scandal in the place; and after all, as he told himself, he would have paid double to get rid of her. At last he was free; his house was his own for that night at least. His solitude seemed delightful; he was rid of his incubus—his Old Man of the Mountains, and if the Old House had no mistress, at least he was master.

CHAPTER XXIII

NUMBER FIFTEEN BEAUFORT TERRACE

'Old age is not in itself matter for sorrow. . . . It is not a serious person's sorrow surely that he is getting out of the battle; that he sees the still regions beyond it, where there is no battle more.'—CARLYLE.

THE ladies at Roadside first learnt the news from Ronald when he went home as usual on Sunday. He was quite breathless with excitement.

'What do you think, mother?' he burst out before he was inside the house. 'Madame la Chatte-Blanche has gone away, and she has sacked the Old House from attic to basement; and it is a beastly shame, that is what I call it,' added the lad angrily.

'Hush, dear, hush,' returned his mother cautiously. 'Mr. Nugent is in the sitting-room with Pansy and Phil, and he must not hear you say such things. Who told you, Ron? perhaps there is some exaggeration'; but Ronald was quite sure of his facts.

Valerie heard all about it as they walked home from the cathedral. As they left the green, Mr. Nugent had come to her side, and told Phil to run after the others.

'I want to speak to you,' he said quietly; 'there is something you ought to know'; and then he gave her

a brief and condensed account of his interview with Madame Mercier; but he said nothing to her of the dismantled rooms—she heard it later on from Emma. 'If you knew what this means to me,' he went on; 'to be free—free! For years I have wanted to have my house to myself, but the child hampered me, and I had not found Madame Mère out then. Either she was an accomplished hypocrite, or I was remarkably dense; for though I was never in touch with her, and never cared for her companionship, I thought she was devoted to Philippa,—a little rigid and old-fashioned, perhaps, in her discipline, but—fool that I was—I imagined it was all for the child's good.'

'I think you should not blame yourself,' returned Valerie softly. 'Madame Mercier was a clever woman; she knew how to hoodwink you; the moment I saw her I found out that she was not true.'

'True!' in a tone of bitterness. 'Oh, I cannot tell you the things I have heard from one servant after another; they were afraid to tell me until I spoke to Emma, and then it all came out. I made up my mind then that the same roof should not shelter us again.'

Valerie was silent, but he did not doubt her sympathy; in reality she was saying to herself—

'He is a strong man; I never thought he could be so masterful; that woman with all her audacity and double-dealing had not a chance against him; he has crushed her—crushed her absolutely'; and then her eyes brightened.

'A man ought to have power—it is his prerogative; a weak man is contrary to nature.'

There was a little more talk, and then, as they came in sight of Roadside, Valerie said hurriedly—

'I think it would be well to tell Philippa that her grandmother has gone. If you come in now, you shall

be left alone with her until tea is ready'; and as Mr. Nugent always acted on Mrs. Thurston's advice, he willingly assented to this, and followed her into the house.

When Phil heard the news, her eyes widened and grew large with astonishment.

'Say it again, father,' she gasped. 'I don't seem to understand; say it over very slowly'; and then Mr. Nugent repeated it.

'You must not look pale over it, sweetheart,' he said tenderly; 'there is nothing to be sorry about. Gran will be far happier in her little flat in Paris. She never cared for England, and I am sure she was glad to leave us.'

'But, father,' in a plaintive voice, 'do you think it was quite kind of Gran to go away to live and not bid me good-bye—and when I was not well too?'

It was an awkward question, and it was best to answer it truthfully.

'No, Phil, I cannot say it was; but Gran was not always kind. There, don't trouble your little head about her, let us talk of pleasanter things'; but he could see that Phil was still uneasy.

'Yes, father, in a minute, but there is one thing I want to know first—am I to come home now?'

'Do you mean that you are tired of being here?' he asked jestingly.

'Oh, no, no,' she returned vehemently. 'I do so love this dear little house, and I never wish to leave it; but, father, I want you too, and if you are lonely'—But he shook his head with a reassuring smile.

'I was never less lonely in my life. Now, darling, let us understand each other very clearly. We always want each other—that's natural; but you are likely to see as

much of me at Roadside. I am very busy, Phil; those boys of mine take up all my time, and you would be terribly lonely at the Old House.'

'Then don't you mean me to come home, father?' and he could see a relieved look in her eyes.

'No, dear, I mean you to stay with your kind friends, and let them teach you how to grow up into a sweet, lovable woman. I want my little girl to be happy and to make others happy'; and as he said this two little arms clasped his neck.

'Oh, father dear, I am glad; I wanted to stop here so dreadfully. I don't know why, but the Old House seems so dull and big and gloomy'; and he felt her shudder as she spoke.

'The iron has gone deeper than we know,' he said in a troubled tone to Valerie that evening; 'it will be years before she forgets what they made her suffer. I do not wish her to enter the Old House until I have made certain changes. When her nerves are braced, and she is stronger, she will learn to forget.'

'She has a beautiful nature,' returned Valerie, 'only it has needed sunshine to develop it. Children are like tender plants; they cannot thrive in the shade.'

'No, indeed,' and then he added bitterly: 'I wonder how many child murders there are in the world—how many crippled and mentally stunted and dwarfed little creatures owe their blighted existence to the tyranny of a despotic nature? Oh, that such things should be, and that we cannot prevent it.'

'Yes, I know,' replied Valerie in a low voice; 'these things have troubled me, and they always will: they are the unsolved problems of life. The suffering of the innocent and the helpless—this is the mystery of mysteries, whether we think of the sacrificial kids and lambs, or

of the martyred babes in Bethlehem'—and then she paused, and went on in a voice that thrilled him with its divine pity; 'and there are child martyrs still in every city, and no one knows of them but the God who created them.'

In looking back at this period of her life, Valerie owned to herself that she had much reason for thankfulness. The first springtide of her widowhood wore peacefully away. She and Pansy found plenty of occupation in training their little maid Phebe and watching over Philippa. Night and day she was never left alone for a moment, and their chief duty seemed to be to play with her and keep her amused.

'I am never left by myself now,' Phil once said, when Mr. Nugent found her helping Mrs. Thurston as she bedded out her plants. 'I am learning the names of all the flowers'; and then Phil put out a brown little hand in the most confiding fashion.

When the summer days grew sultry, and Phil began to flag, Valerie went away with her to the seaside. Mr. Nugent had taken comfortable rooms for them at Eardley, a quiet, retired little watering-place that Dr. Franklin was fond of recommending to his patients. 'There is a good beach and downs,' he would say, 'and the country round is pretty, and if people want to be quiet and keep to themselves, Eardley is just the place for them.'

Mr. Nugent had suggested that Pansy should accompany them, but the girl herself at once negatived this.

'It is quite impossible, Marmee,' she said. 'Dr. Franklin has told us that Phil ought to be away the whole summer, and how do you suppose we could both

leave Phebe and the Roadside Caravan to take care of themselves for months?'

'Then we could take turns and relieve each other,' suggested her step-mother; but Pansy objected to this. 'Mr. Nugent would not approve of that arrangement,' she said quite seriously; 'and, to be honest, I should not care for the responsibility. I should be telegraphing for you if Phil looked white, or refused to eat her dinner. No, no! I would rather stay in the Caravan.'

'But you will be so dull, Pansy dear, and the change would do you so much good'; but Pansy remained obstinate.

'I am quite well, and don't need a change in the least, and I shall not be dull at all; I have heaps to do. I am going to practise; and Doris and I have arranged to read French together, and I shall join their sketching party—in fact the days will not be long enough for all I want to do.'

Pansy was so determined to make the best of things that Valerie tried to be content. She knew that the girl would half live with the Granthams; and then there was the Deanery; and although she would not have owned it for worlds, she felt in need herself of a change. Wycombe was always trying to her in summer: it was close and airless, and the small rooms and narrow garden at Roadside made her long for air and space.

Mr. Nugent had taken pleasant rooms for them—a good-sized drawing-room with a bay-window leading out to the balcony; the bedroom, also of a fair size, opened out of it; across the passage was a small back-room that Valerie could use as a dressing-room. Number Fifteen was almost the central house in Beaufort Terrace; it looked over a wide green where the youth of Eardley played cricket and rounders, and beyond

was the Parade and the beach, and to the left a Martello tower and the green swelling downs. How Valerie longed that first evening to go down to the water's edge and fill her lungs with the sweet, strong air; but Phil was tired, and she dared not leave her,—not until she was asleep could she go out on the balcony to listen to the soft splash of the waves. She stood there for more than an hour in a perfect ecstasy of enjoyment. 'Now I can breathe,' she kept saying to herself; and she stopped there until her face and hair were quite damp with the night dews.

It was a strangely quiet life that they led at Eardley. In the morning Valerie sat on the beach with her work and book while Phil joined the other children, and built sand fortresses or laid out wonderful gardens. After their early dinner Phil always had a long nap and Valerie wrote letters, and in the evening they wandered in the cornfields or on the downs, and when Phil was tired Valerie would read to her some simple story. Phil's little letters breathed intense enjoyment. 'It is just lovely here,' she wrote. 'Each day is nicer than the last. Oh dear, I just ache with happiness!' which was a somewhat original expression.

Mr. Nugent did not pay them many visits. Mrs. Thurston sent him a weekly letter, and she wrote daily to Pansy, so he had no lack of news. When he came he always took them by surprise.

Late one Saturday evening, when Valerie was sitting on the balcony enjoying the effect of the moonlight on the water, she was startled by seeing a dark figure in the road below pause under the window. The next minute she saw that it was Mr. Nugent, but to her surprise he merely lifted his hat and passed on, and she did not see him again. Valerie felt a little

puzzled; it seemed strange to her that he should not have called for a minute to ask after Philippa; but as he walked with them to church the next morning he explained the reason very simply.

'It was too late to intrude on you,' he said. 'I knew if I were wanted that you would send me a message. It was a glorious night and I did not return to my hotel until after eleven. All lights were out in Number Fifteen then.'

Mr. Nugent went back to luncheon at the hotel, and joined them later on on the beach. When Phil had left them for a few moments he told Valerie that he was astonished and delighted at the child's improved appearance. 'She has only been here three weeks,' he remarked, 'and she has gained flesh and colour; her face is not nearly so thin; this afternoon she looks almost pretty.' And as Phil ran up to them to show them a baby crab she had caught, she looked quite flushed and dimpled with excitement. Mr. Nugent had a hasty cup of tea with them, and then he had to take his train. They never saw more of him than this. But those afternoons on the beach were pleasant breaks in the quiet, monotonous weeks.

Valerie heard regularly from Pansy. She was a delightful correspondent, and her letters were always full of interest. She and the Grantham girls were always together, and there seemed to be no lack of quiet amusement.

Presently she wrote in great excitement. The Dean wanted to go up to town to hunt out some musty old folios in the British Museum. Mrs. Walcott would accompany him, and she had offered to take Pansy. 'They think of staying a fortnight, and have taken very nice rooms in Bedford Square,' wrote Pansy; 'and

as the Dean will be hard at work all day at the Museum, Mrs. Walcott says she will need a companion to help her with her shopping. If you do not object, Marmee, I should dearly love to go, for even London will be cooler than Scylla and Charybdis. I take all my meals like Mrs. Jarley outside the caravan, only I have a table instead of a drum. Phebe's sister, Dorcas, can come and keep her company; so please write, like an old dear, and say I may go.'

Valerie received a letter from Mrs. Walcott by the same post. 'Pansy begins to look as though she needs a change,' she wrote; 'it is terribly hot just now, and she has rather a washed-out appearance. I wish I could take her with us to Scotland, but we are going to stay with friends. London in July is rather a desert, but I think we shall be able to amuse ourselves. I mean to take her to Kew and Richmond. We can go down by river; and if the Dean could spare time, we might spend a day at Hampton Court.'

Valerie wrote a grateful letter by return of post. The treat would do Pansy a world of good. It was the first summer that she had ever spent in Wycombe, and it was no wonder the heat tried her.

Valerie was longing for a sight of Pansy; she missed her bright companionship sadly. It was impossible not to feel dull at times. She was very brave, and strove hard against depression; but she had her dark hours sometimes, when the memory of past sadness seemed to close round her like a mist, and she could not shake it off. At other times she had strange, restless moods, when she seemed to chafe and fret against some nameless, invisible influence.

'It is because I am young,' she would say to herself, as she paced the balcony in the darkness. 'If

one could only grow old quickly—if one could get rid of one's youth, perhaps there would be a possibility of rest; but I am so full of life—so full of life.'

It had been a sultry day even at Eardley, and towards night a storm seemed impending, but it had broken elsewhere. Every now and then there was a faint, distant rumbling, and the pallid sheet-lightning lit up the horizon. The sombreness of the scene, the murky sky, the sea with its strange, fitful illumination, the closeness of the atmosphere, and the monotonous roll of the distant thunder, affected Valerie strangely.

'I must grow old,' she repeated; 'the old do not suffer as the young do; their feelings are blunted and they have learnt to be calm; they have accepted their limitations. Yes, that is so true; they have made up their mind to submit to the inevitable.'

Valerie's face looked a little pale and drawn as she paced restlessly up and down, but there was no one to notice it. She was in a pessimistic mood, and the latent storm was irritating her nerves; but there was profound truth underlying her sadness.

Life was too meagre and colourless for her; it lacked scope and freedom; and perhaps, as she said herself, she was too young for the existence she had to lead. She was only thirty-two, and in the very perfection of her womanly prime. Trouble had come to her —wearing, carking trouble—but her health had not suffered. Her finely balanced physical powers had not failed her.

'I am so young and strong,' she murmured in a curious undertone, as she leant over the balcony, 'and life is so long, and winds up-hill all the way.' Then she roused herself and stamped her foot as though she were angry. 'I am a wicked, ungrateful woman,' she

muttered, 'when Heaven has given me so many blessings —my Ron and Pansy—and——' but here another lurid flash lit up the landscape, and the next moment she started with a little cry. Mr. Nugent was standing underneath the balcony, waiting as though to speak to her.

'You are very imprudent,' he said, in a low, distinct voice; 'you have been out there for more than an hour. I could see you from the Parade. Please go in. The storm is gathering again, and we shall have rain directly. Please do, Mrs. Thurston.'

'Very well,' she returned dreamily, 'I will go—good-night'; but she felt a little numb and unsteady as she closed the window; then she said a strange thing to herself:—

'Yes, I was right; it is best to grow old quickly, and the old are not without their guardian angels'; then a shudder passed over her. 'It is not good to be young unless one is happy; there was no old age in Eden.'

CHAPTER XXIV

A 'SURPRISE PARTY'

'Yea, on one steep mountain side,
Climbing to a fancied fold,
Roses grasped had let me slide,
But the thorns did keep their hold.

'Out of darkness light is born,
Out of weakness make me strong;
One glad day will every thorn
Break into a rose of song.'—GEORGE MACDONALD.

ALTHOUGH Mr. Nugent had no love of the dramatic, he was certainly much given to surprises. When he made up his mind to do a thing, his masculine impatience would not brook the least delay. It was this impetuosity and high-handedness that had so astonished Valerie. Philippa was an inmate of her house and Madame Mercier back in her Paris flat before she had had time to realise the situation. And now his active brain had evolved another plan; and so it was that as Valerie sat one hot August afternoon writing to Pansy, while Phil was asleep in the inner room, the door slowly opened, and a slender little figure glided in, and the next moment a softly uttered 'Marmee' made Valerie start from her chair in amazement.

'Oh, you dear child, you dear child,' she exclaimed in a tone of gladness, 'and I was just writing to you. Hush! don't speak, Phil is asleep, and I will close the door and then we can talk comfortably. Now what does this mean?' she inquired, when the folding-doors were safely shut; 'why have you stolen a march on me like this, you most incomprehensible young person?'

'It was not my doing,' returned Pansy with a shrug. 'Mr. Nugent called yesterday—and found me as usual doing Mrs. Jarley outside Charybdis—and he said the place was like an oven, and that I looked like half-baked dough, or words to that effect. And then he told me that I had better pack up, and come down to Eardley with him and Ronald the next day. Oh, I forgot!'—looking a little guilty—'Ron begged me not to say he was at the hotel; he wanted to surprise you too.'

'Ron is here at the hotel!' exclaimed Valerie in a voice that was staccato with amazement. She knew that the holidays had begun, and that the boy would be stranded for the next seven weeks, and she had wondered what Pansy would do with him. She was all the more surprised as Mr. Nugent had been down the previous week, and she certainly had not expected to see him so soon again; but Pansy was able to explain matters.

'Mr. Nugent had invited Ron to stay at the Old House,' she observed; 'he said the house was so big and empty, and Ron would be company for him. And then it came into his head that he would give him a treat and take him for a few days to Eardley before he went abroad. You know Mr. Nugent is going to Norway?'

'Oh yes! he told me so himself.'

'Well, he just called at the Caravan to impart this bit of information, and then I suppose my dough-like appearance struck him. I know now what you mean by his being masterful, Marmee—whirlwinds and tornadoes were nothing to it; he would not hear me speak, he would not listen. He said he could not think of leaving me behind; that Ronald would be with him at the hotel, and that there was a spare room at Beaufort Terrace that he could take for me, and that a week or ten days of sea-breezes and your society would do me a world of good. I believe I was hypnotised at last, for I actually promised meekly to pack my things, and "here we are and here we go," as Trotty Veck expressed it.'

Valerie did not reply for a moment; she was regarding the girl a little anxiously. No wonder Mr. Nugent had felt dissatisfied with her appearance. The visit to London had not done much for her; she looked absolutely ill. Her face was smaller and thinner, and there were dark lines round her eyes.

Pansy stamped her foot in rather a petulant fashion when she became aware of this scrutiny. 'I will not have you stare at me, Marmee,' she said irritably; 'you are as bad as Mr. Nugent, and he was excessively rude. The heat never suits me, and it was just grilling in the Caravan. I thought of Nebuchadnezzar's furnace every time I went into the house, and as for Phebe, she lived in the scullery.'

'But I thought your little change to town would have done you good,' observed Valerie.

'So it did, and I enjoyed it awfully. The Dean was such an old dear—and as for Mrs. Walcott, she was kindness itself. If I had been the apple of their

eyes, or their ewe-lamb, or anything particularly costly or precious, they could not have taken better care of me. Mrs. Walcott gave me a new frock, a nice black barege, that she said would be a comfort to me this hot weather. I loved her more than ever that day, especially when she told the dressmaker that it must have a silk lining.'

Pansy was chattering on in her old fashion, but there was a restless expression in her eyes, and she seemed unwilling to sit still; every now and then she went out on the balcony to look for Ronald.

'I cannot think what is keeping him,' she observed more than once, 'he was to follow me in a quarter of an hour'; but it was quite half an hour before she caught sight of him. Valerie flew downstairs to meet him—she had not seen him for more than two months; but though Ronald greeted her with affection, he was much disappointed that she was not more surprised to see him.

'That is the worst of telling a girl anything; she is sure to blab,' he said contemptuously. 'Pansy has just gone and spoiled everything.' But Ronald changed his opinion when Phil threw herself upon him with a cry of delight that was perfectly genuine.

'Oh! you nice boy,' she exclaimed, hugging him, 'you nicest of all boys, to surprise us. Pansy never said a word to me, or Marmee either,' for Phil had quietly adopted Pansy's name for her step-mother.

It had rather embarrassed Valerie at first; but Phil pleaded so hard to use it that she had to give way.

'Mrs. Thurston is so long a name,' Phil said once, 'and it sounds so stiff and cold, and Marmee is just a pet name, and is so pretty; and I love you quite as

much as Pansy does,' and after that Valerie had not the heart to object.

Mr. Nugent had been very much amused when he first heard it, but it pleased him strangely.

'You have won my little girl's heart, Mrs. Thurston,' he said pleasantly; 'even a child's affection is not to be despised.' And it was evident that Valerie agreed with him.

When Phil had exhausted her raptures, and Ronald had spoken his mind rather freely to his sister, Valerie restored peace and harmony by sending him round to fetch Mr. Nugent to tea. It was evident that he expected the invitation, for Ronald met him before he had gone half-way to the hotel. The boy was still a little sore on the subject of Pansy.

'You said, ladies first, you know, sir,' he said feelingly; 'but they just spoil sport for a fellow. I meant to have crept into the room and got under the table, and when mother was not looking I would have begun whistling "The Campbells are coming," or, "Charlie is my Darling," or something lively. Just think how she would have stared, and looked about her, and there would have been nothing to be seen.'

'"How that reminds me of Ron's whistling," she would say; "it is some boy in the street, I suppose," but that tiresome Pansy has trumped my trick.'

Mr. Nugent privately thought that it was just as well that Miss Pansy let the cat out of the bag, but he kept this opinion to himself; he was half afraid of the effect of so much excitement on Phil; her joy was so great on seeing herself surrounded by all these beloved faces that she could not take her tea.

Pansy was about to remonstrate with her, but her step-mother gave her a warning look.

'It has been such a hot day,' she said quietly. 'I expect Phil will be more ready for her supper;' and then she proposed that they should all go for a blow on the downs.

The next few days passed very pleasantly to Valerie. As Pansy somewhat graphically defined the situation: 'Marmee has had enough of "Dolly Dialogues," and though a milk diet may be wholesome, the grown-up mind requires stronger aliment; and Phil, morning, noon, and night — plain, unadulterated Phil—must be a burden to flesh and spirit.'

They did not see much of Mr. Nugent; he generally went off for the day on his bicycle, but he always joined them on the balcony for an hour in the evening, and there was no doubt that his conversation gave Valerie a great deal of pleasure. He never seemed to think it necessary to talk down to her level because she was a woman; he took it for granted that the subject that interested his masculine intelligence was equally attractive to her. This was the subtlest form of flattery, and it at once stimulated and pleased her. With the exception of the Dean, she had never before enjoyed this unrestrained intercourse with a deep-thinking intellectual man.

'It makes one grow,' she said once to Pansy; 'it is difficult to express what I mean, but Mr. Nugent always seems to draw out one's best. I have met clever men before now, but they always seemed to repress and extinguish my poor little efforts at conversation; but Mr. Nugent only tries to trim one's wick and make it burn more brightly. I am confusing my metaphors, but you know what I mean?'

'Dear me, yes,' returned Pansy promptly. 'I was thinking of bringing out a sunshade the other evening;

there was such a brilliant illumination it quite dazzled me. You are a clever woman, Marmee, though you never let people find it out; but there are gold-mines to be discovered if folks only dig deep enough.'

Valerie would have enjoyed herself thoroughly those ten days but for one drawback; she was not at all satisfied with Pansy. At times the girl seemed in high spirits—she would talk and laugh in her old mirthful fashion with an abandon bordering on recklessness, and then all at once she would start up and go off by herself, and wander for an hour over the downs, or by the receding waves on the shore; and when she came back there would be a hard, strained look in her eyes, as though she had been passing through some mental conflict, but she would endure no questioning, and the merest allusion to her looks made her irritable.

When Valerie made a pitying remark on her returning to Roadside, Pansy refused to listen to her or to acknowledge that she had been the least dull during those two months.

'Phebe is a very cheerful person,' she observed once; 'it takes time to find out her merits. Her spirits have wonderfully improved since the new carrier appeared. She cannot wash up the tea-things without bubbling over into song. They are different songs,' continued Pansy thoughtfully; 'but she sings them all to one tune. It is a simple arrangement, and saves a good deal of trouble.'

'My dear Pansy, what can you mean—the new carrier?'

'Yes, he is brand new, quite glossy with newness; and he has curly hair, and his name is Jem—their name is always Jem, if it is not Dick,—and the amount of parcels Jem brings, and the difficulty he

finds in giving the right change, is not to be described.'

Valerie looked alarmed. Phebe was a good-looking girl, and she was afraid that this indicated a flirtation. But Pansy would not allow this for a moment.

'Jem Evans was a widower,' she explained; 'he was five-and-thirty, and he had a little girl, a rosy-cheeked snub-nosed creature, who sometimes came with him in the van. Phebe gave the child apples. Her name was Jemima. The wooing o't was carried on with great solemnity and very little conversation. I think Jem must do a good deal of execution with his eyes,' went on Pansy in a tone of enjoyment, 'for I notice that Phebe has a fine colour whenever she brings in a parcel; and she always sings louder for an hour or two.'

Two or three days after this, Ronald came round to Beaufort Terrace in a high state of excitement; a school-fellow, Fred Markham, had written to tell him that he was going to Scarborough; and as his parents had given him permission to invite one of his friends to accompany them, he begged Ronald to come. Fred was an only child, and Mrs. Markham had wisely suggested to her husband that a companion of his own age would add to the boy's enjoyment. She had written to Mrs. Thurston by the same post a kind motherly letter, which greatly pleased her.

She consulted Mr. Nugent when he came over. 'It will be a great treat for Ron,' she said seriously, 'and he will have nothing to amuse him at Wycombe, but I hardly like to accept so much from comparative strangers,' but Mr. Nugent soon overruled this objection.

'He liked the Markhams,' he said; 'they were respectable people, very simple and hospitable, and extremely kind to their poorer neighbours, and with no preten-

sions. It was quite true that they did not visit in the Close. Mr. Markham's father had been a cutler, and had kept a small shop in Deansgate, but he had unexpectedly come in to a good deal of money, and the shop was a thing of the past. That it was still remembered was evident from Fred Markham's nickname at school. The fellows call him "Scissors,"' went on Mr. Nugent with a smile—'boys are a bit crude and brutal; but he is a nice lad, and the intimacy will not be a bad thing for Ronald'; and then Valerie gratefully accepted the invitation.

Mr. Nugent made another arrangement which gave her much pleasure; he persuaded her not to let Pansy return to Wycombe.

'I cannot allow you to sacrifice all your comfort to my little girl,' he said to her one day, 'and though you are too good to say so, I am quite sure that your life here must be terribly monotonous. Miss Pansy ought to be considered too; I am not satisfied with her looks. I should like her to remain here until you return to Wycombe.' And after a good deal of talk and a few objections from Pansy, Mr. Nugent had his way.

Phebe's sister was to keep her company until they returned early in September; and when matters were finally settled, Valerie and Pansy both owned that they were immensely relieved at the arrangement.

Ronald went off in high glee to join the Markhams at the Métropole, and Mr. Nugent accompanied him to town, leaving a quiet little party behind them.

Phil was so dull without her father and Ronald that Pansy exerted herself to amuse her, and by the evening she was so tired that Valerie persuaded her to sit on the balcony and get cool, while she put the child to bed.

It was a lovely moonlight night, and the breeze from the sea was deliciously soft and fresh. A broad silver path seemed to stretch across the dark water, and over the downs one or two stars twinkled in the dark blue ether. Valerie stood still for a moment before she joined Pansy—she was charmed by the beauty and serenity of the summer night; it seemed to steep her very soul in peace; and she was just going to express her feelings aloud when a deep sigh from Pansy roused her. Valerie's step had been so noiseless that the girl believed herself still alone. She was standing with her glance fixed on a little boat rocking at anchor, but in the moonlight her face looked drawn, and there was an expression almost of despair in her eyes.

The next moment Valerie's strong small hands were on her shoulders. 'Pansy,' she said almost sternly, 'why do you look like that? What have I done that you fear to trust me; we have always told each other everything, and now you are in trouble and I do not know it—even Mr. Nugent noticed that you were not yourself.'

It was evident that Pansy was unprepared for this attack; Valerie had taken her at disadvantage. For a moment she stood as though she were dumbfounded, then she dropped her head on Valerie's shoulder with the gesture of a worn-out child.

'Oh!' she said with a little sob, 'I wanted to keep it to myself, and not to trouble other people, but you will not let me. I am so unhappy, Marmee; I think I should be glad to die, and have done with it all. I have heard from Gurth; he is coming to fetch me; he is on his way now.'

CHAPTER XXV

'WILL YOU SHOW ME MR. FORDHAM'S LETTER'

'Her griefs were feminine, but to her as a woman they were not less hard to bear, and she felt an equal right to the Promethean tone.'—GEORGE ELIOT.

'Ill news is winged with fate and flies apace.'—DRYDEN.

IT could not be denied that Pansy's words gave Valerie a great shock. Time and distance had made Gurth Fordham's image so misty and indistinct that she had failed to connect the idea of him with Pansy's changed looks. The girl had not mentioned his name for months, and Valerie had somehow cheated herself into the belief that they would go on as they were for years.

'Mr. Fordham cannot come and fetch her, and Pansy absolutely refuses to go to him,' she had said once to Mrs. Walcott, 'so I hardly see how they are ever to meet'; and Mrs. Walcott had agreed with her that it was extremely doubtful whether the marriage would ever take place.

But it was now evident that they had reckoned without their host, and that they were not to dispose so lightly of Gurth Fordham. He was coming over to fetch his wife; at the cost of serious inconvenience he

was crossing thousands of miles of ocean. The thought of the man's purpose and force, the tenacity and faithfulness with which he held to his bond, thrilled Valerie to the heart. No knight of the Round Table had ever wooed his liege lady with greater devotion than this rough colonist, and yet a coy reluctant bride awaited him. Valerie felt almost too shaken and troubled to speak a consoling word to the girl who was clinging to her so despairingly. If only Pansy had taken her advice and broken off her engagement; if she had not been so wilful in her fanciful and over-strained self-sacrifice and sense of duty. But at this eleventh hour how was any one to help her.

'Marmee, why don't you speak?' exclaimed Pansy at last in a miserable little voice; 'one would think my news had turned you into stone.' Then Valerie tried to pull herself together.

'Will you show me Mr. Fordham's letter, dear; I think I could grasp things better then.' But Pansy shook her head, and drew herself slowly away from the kind arms that had clasped her.

'I am sorry, Marmee, but I cannot possibly do that.'

'Oh, Pansy, do you mean that you have destroyed it?' then Pansy did look a little ashamed of herself.

'I could not help it,' she whispered. 'I was so miserable, and those dreadful words, "I am coming," seemed staring at me like live things. I was in such a rage with myself and him that I tore the letter up into a hundred pieces. But it was no use,' in a dejected tone, 'I cannot forget a sentence of it. There was a kind little note enclosed from Mary Dunbar, and I destroyed that too.'

Valerie was silent from sheer pity. It was the act of an undisciplined child.

'It was the nicest letter he ever wrote,' went on Pansy remorsefully—'I mean the kindest; and he seemed in such good spirits, and so looking forward to the voyage. He said he minded nothing, if only I would get ready for him.'

Valerie grew a little pale. 'That means that he expects to marry you at once,' she returned in a low voice. 'Oh, Pansy, what are we to do? Did he tell you the name of his vessel, and when it is to arrive?'

'Yes. It is the *Cromlin Castle*, and she will be due either this week or next. Ah, I knew I should take your breath away, Marmee,' as Valerie uttered an exclamation; 'I wanted not to spoil your holiday, but somehow it got on my nerves, and I could not bear being by myself any longer; and when Mr. Nugent proposed my accompanying him and Ronald I just jumped at his invitation. I knew that I should have to tell you, but somehow the opportunity never came.'

'No, it never came,' in a hurt voice. 'Tell me the truth, Pansy. Would you have gone back to Roadside, if Mr. Nugent had not begged you to remain, with all this on your mind, and leaving me in ignorance?'

'I don't know. I cannot tell,' returned Pansy doubtfully. 'I was never in the same mind for an hour together. The whole thing seemed to drive me crazy. Sometimes I thought I would get over the first meeting without telling you a word, and then it came into my head that I would run away somewhere. Oh, you must not look so hurt, Marmee, for I wanted badly to tell you all the time, but I think I had got a dumb devil.'

'Hush! You must not talk so recklessly. It will do no good, and it is always better to face things, how-

ever bad they are.' But Pansy was too unhappy to be reasonable.

'I don't agree with you,' she said dejectedly. 'When people are going to be hanged they always have a black cap drawn over their eyes, and then they can drop comfortably. But you will not let me blindfold myself for a moment.'

'Pansy, dear, you are making things so much worse by going on in this way.'

'I cannot help it, Marmee. I have kept it all to myself so long that it has almost turned my brain. Every night I made up my mind that I would run away, but in the morning there seemed nowhere to go. It is always so nice and easy in novels,' continued Pansy dreamily. 'The heroine disguises herself in blue spectacles, and goes as nursery-governess in a family about a stone's throw from her bereaved and distracted family; or she flies to the other end of the world and is discovered on a sheep farm in Australia, surrounded by adoring bush-rangers; she has even been extracted from the tent of a Bedouin Arab. And yet, whatever she suffered, it all came right in the third volume.'

'Pansy, Pansy, why will you go on in this ridiculous manner? It would be so much better to talk quietly and take counsel together, for we are only wasting time.' Valerie spoke in a tone of the gentlest persuasion, for she saw the girl could hardly restrain her tears. Then Pansy, who was kneeling beside her, crossed her arms on Valerie's lap and laid down her head on them.

'Well, go on,' she returned drearily, 'you may talk now, and I will listen.'

'From what you tell me,' returned her step-mother, 'Mr. Fordham may be expected at Wycombe in about

ten days' or a fortnight's time. He has your address, of course?' Pansy nodded. 'In that case he will come straight to Roadside. We will look in the paper each day to see when the *Cromlin Castle* is due, and then I think it would be better for me to go to Wycombe and receive him. I can easily let Mr. Nugent know that I am leaving Phil in your charge, and then I shall be able to explain matters to Mr. Fordham.'

'Good Heavens, Marmee! what do you mean?' and Pansy lifted a pale scared face in the moonlight. 'Why should you receive Gurth when you have never even seen him. Do you suppose,' and Pansy's voice grew shrill with wrathful excitement, 'that I could break my engagement now,—now, when he has come all these thousands of miles to fetch me? Marmee, I know I am a contemptible little fool, but I am not so mean as that. If it kills me to go with him, and I think it will, pretty nearly, I shall go all the same.'

'Then you will be sinning against yourself and against Mr. Fordham too,' returned Valerie severely. 'Pansy, I feel very strongly on this point, I have done so all my life. To me marriage without love is the one unpardonable sin. If a woman feels she has made a mistake, and that only interest and not her heart is in the matter, I would have her leave the very altar itself and refuse to plight her troth rather than enter into a loveless contract. Such marriages are degrading, they are not made in heaven, and like the curse causeless, the blessing undeserved will never attend them.'

'You are terribly hard, Marmee.'

'No, dear child. I am only anxious that the divine laws should not be transgressed and set at naught by human weakness. If only our eyes are

clear and our hearts pure, our duty will be perfectly simple. We must go straight on and not do evil that good may come.'

Pansy remained silent. It was not difficult to read her step-mother's meaning.

'If you marry Gurth Fordham without loving him,' continued Valerie, 'the evil of your doing will recoil on both your heads. If he is a good man, your want of affection and the sight of your unhappiness will make him miserable, but he will have no power to set you free. Courage and frankness even at the eleventh hour might save you both.'

'Oh, Marmee, stop! You might as well hand me a dagger and tell me to plunge it in Gurth's heart.'

'Why not one dagger-thrust as well as a dozen?' continued Valerie remorselessly. 'Do you suppose if you were to marry Mr. Fordham that he would not find out that your whole soul was in revolt against him? Pansy, is my opinion, my experience, nothing to you? You know my nature is not really hard. The thought of Mr. Fordham's disappointment, after all these years of patient waiting, grieves me to the very heart, but all the same I would not spare him.'

'But I would!' exclaimed Pansy, springing to her feet. 'Hush, Marmee, not another word, not a syllable. I cannot be guided by you in this; no, not though I love you more dearly every day of my life. I must dree my weird. I must and will marry Gurth; and I am a little fool to think I can escape my doom. I will spoil no man's life. How often I have said that, but I mean it—mean it absolutely.' She walked to and fro on the balcony like a thing distraught, and then she threw out her arms towards the dark sea. 'Poor fellow,' Valerie heard her murmur, 'to have such

a welcome as that. No, no, I would rather turn the dagger point to my own heart.'

Valerie was profoundly touched, but she would not show it. She rose quietly from her seat. Pansy turned round in some surprise.

'You are not going in yet, Marmee?'

'Yes, dear, it is very late, and I have said my say.' Then she took the girl in her arms again. 'Good-night. God bless you. I am going to pray that you and he may be guided rightly, for there is nothing else for me to do.' And then after a few moments Pansy followed her into the house.

Valerie slept little that night. She knew Pansy's nature too well to hope that her advice would be taken; her wilfulness and generosity amounted to recklessness. She was a princely giver, and was as ready to squander her substance as any prodigal. Now and then, as Valerie's tired eyes seemed to peer into the future, she wondered with a sudden sickness of heart how it would fare with her and Ronald when Pansy's allowance was withdrawn.

'If she marries Mr. Fordham she will need her three hundred a year,' Valerie said to herself; and this thought only added to her depression.

'Oh, Marmee, what a brute I am. I have given you a bad night,' were Pansy's first words; but this was the only allusion she made to their conversation. Strange to say, she had slept soundly, and looked refreshed and more like herself. There was no opportunity for any private talk until Phil was safely tucked up in bed, and then by tacit consent they went out on the balcony, and Pansy drew a low chair close to Valerie and nestled comfortably against her, and they sat for some time in perfect silence.

Presently Pansy put her cheek caressingly against Valerie's hand.

'Marmee, dear,' she said gently, 'you were so sweet to me last night; it hurts me dreadfully to know that we do not think alike about this, and that I must not take your advice.'

'Do you mean that your mind is quite made up, Pansy?'

'Yes, it is made up, and I must just bide the bitterment, as old Sal used to say. There is no need for any one to go back to Wycombe. When we know he has arrived I can send him word to come here. After all, what does it matter where we meet—Eardley, or Wycombe, or London; but, Marmee, there is just one word I want to say. I have thought it all out, and I know Gurth will agree with me. I shall divide my money into equal shares, and you and he will each have half.'

'Pansy, you must know that this is impossible; besides, Mr. Nugent pays me so handsomely for Phil that I could manage nicely'; but Pansy refused to listen.

'Marmee, do you suppose that Gurth is marrying me for my trumpery three hundred a year. He is quite well off now. His business has prospered, and he has made some lucky investments. He said so in his letter. Do you think,' continued Pansy, and her lip trembled, 'that I am going off to the other end of the world, and leave you to pinch and grow old before your time. As I do not wish to be an expense to the man I marry, my hundred and fifty will make me independent of him. Oh, I have thought it all out,' went on Pansy with an air of wisdom that seemed almost whimsical in spite of her gravity, 'and I know I am right.'

'Then I will say no more for the present,' returned Valerie, with a meaning emphasis on the last word; 'and whatever may be your final decision I thank you from my heart, darling, for your kind thought'; and then they talked with greater calmness of the dreaded future that lay before them. Pansy had never been more loving than she was during the next few days, but after the first she spoke little of her feelings.

She would come down morning after morning with heavy eyes, as though she had slept badly, but she would never allow that this was the case. 'One never enjoys one's bed in the hot weather,' she would say; 'you don't look quite smart yourself, Marmee.'

But through the day she followed Valerie about like a shadow, and she never seemed willing to have her out of her sight for a moment.

'Let me be with you as much as I can,' she would say. 'I want you more than Phil does; Phil is not going to leave you'; and here Pansy's voice broke a little. 'Oh, Marmee, what a cruel thing life is after all.'

On Sunday evening, as they were sitting out on the balcony as usual, Valerie was struck by a curious rapt expression on Pansy's face.

'I should like to know your thoughts, dear,' she whispered; then a flush crossed the girl's face. 'It was only because it was Sunday,' she said in a low voice. 'One has Sunday thoughts and week-day thoughts, and sometimes they get mixed in the oddest way. One can have worldly Sundays and pious Mondays—you know what I mean.'

'Oh yes,' returned Valerie, unable to restrain a smile at this; 'a good many people lay aside their religion with their best bonnets in their wardrobe, and

only take it out when the church bells begin to ring; that is why one sees so many unsatisfactory lives.'

'Well, I can't throw stones at them,' observed Pansy frankly. 'I have been a pleasure-loving, worldly-minded little sinner myself. Don't you remember how I shocked Mrs. Walcott by telling her that I was always so bored on Sundays, and that she ought to start a school for saints? She called me a naughty, flippant child, and said she did not believe that I was half so bad as I made myself out.'

'And she was right, Pansy.'

'Well, never mind that. I would promise you not to be bored on Sundays now, Marmee,' relapsing into a dreary tone. 'I have been thinking over that verse "there shall be no more sea." It always puzzled me that there should be an end of anything so beautiful, but I understand it now.'

'I think I do too. You see the sea divides; it gives the idea of distance and separation, and in that new, fair world there will be no more partings. Is not that your meaning, Pansy?' Then Pansy's soft little hand pressed hers silently, as though her heart were too full for speech. How often Valerie thought of these words in future days.

CHAPTER XXVI

UNDER THE BREAKWATER

'Oh, what comes over the sea,
Shoals and quicksands past;
And what comes home to me,
Sailing slow, sailing fast.

'Let me be, let me be,
For my lot is cast;
Land or sea, all's one to me,
And sail it slow or fast.'

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI.

VALERIE thought that Pansy must have made a miscalculation when a fortnight passed and there was still no news of the *Cromlin Castle.*

The last week of their stay at Eardley had arrived, and Valerie was already making preparations for her return home after her three months' absence when the dreaded paragraph met her eyes; she pointed it out silently to Pansy as they sat together at the breakfast-table. Pansy's face was shielded by the paper, but presently she said in a muffled voice, 'He will be at Wycombe to-morrow.'

'Yes, I expect so. You had better send a note by the afternoon post, and Phebe will give it to him when he calls.' Here Valerie paused, for she did not like to say more. She had urged Pansy more than once to

write a letter that could be delivered to Mr. Fordham before he left the vessel, but Pansy had refused to do this or to telegraph.

'He will think nothing of the distance,' she said obstinately. 'When he finds we are not there he will just take the next train and come on here.'

'Yes, I daresay. I was only thinking of his disappointment and whether we could not spare him'; but Pansy, who was in one of her perverse moods, turned a deaf ear to this. Valerie was half afraid that she would negative this fresh suggestion; in that case she fully intended to write herself, but to her relief Pansy offered no objection.

'There will be plenty of time when I have had my bath,' she observed; 'it is far too fine a day to waste indoors; besides the country post does not go out until nearly five'; and though Valerie was sorry for the delay, as no amount of procrastination would make a difficult task easier, she was obliged to submit to the girl's whim.

At luncheon-time the note was not written, and tea was on the table before Pansy returned from the post office; she had a tired, draggled expression, as though she had been walking for miles. Valerie sent Phil into the next room to get an ink-stain off her finger, then she said hurriedly, 'I suppose you only sent a short note, and that you were quite in time?' Then a dull uncomfortable flush suffused Pansy's face.

'It was no use. I could not write it,' she said irritably. 'I was half an hour over one sentence, and I began half a dozen times. What was the use of telling him lies, Marmee? I just sent him a telegram with our address, and said you would be glad to see

him. I suppose that was not quite the truth,' as Valerie said nothing, 'but I was obliged to be civil. There, don't say any more,' as Phil returned; 'let us get tea over, and then we can go down on the shore.'

'I must just finish my letter to Mrs. Walcott first,' returned Valerie. 'Don't wait for me, Pansy dear, it is such a lovely evening, and the air will do you and Phil good. I will come down and join you presently,' and as Pansy was evidently too restless and oppressed to remain in the house, she reluctantly consented to this.

'You are always writing to Mrs. Walcott,' she grumbled. 'What on earth can you find to say to her? Eardley is such a stupid little place, and nothing ever happens.'

Valerie smiled. 'When one has a real friend one can always find plenty to say. I love talking to her, and when I cannot get at her I content myself with a paper chat. If I do not write to her every few days she thinks I am neglecting her.'

'Well, cut short your paper chat to-night,' returned Pansy in a bored tone. 'You must look for us on the beach, for I am not smart enough for even Eardley Parade this evening.'

Pansy was always a little satirical about Eardley. She declared that she never saw more than three people and a coastguardsman on the Parade together, except one evening when there was a balloon to be seen, and a crowd of at least twenty people collected. Pansy certainly was not looking her best that evening; her black cambric gown was limp and draggled, and her sailor hat had got damaged with sea-water; even her hair was rough and was less bright and glossy than usual, and her small face looked old and peaky.

Valerie watched her sadly as she crossed the green; her very walk had changed, she thought. Phil was hanging on to her arm, but Pansy seemed to take no notice of her chatter. When they disappeared behind the Martello tower, Valerie drew a heavy sigh and then sat down and resolutely finished her letter. As she dressed herself she thought she might as well post it and get some stamps; it would not take her many minutes, and Pansy would not be looking for her yet.

There were several people in the post office, and she had to wait a little before the young woman was at leisure to attend to her. Presently her attention was attracted by hearing her own name mentioned by a masculine voice close to her. 'Mrs. Thurston, No. 15 Beaufort Terrace,' she heard distinctly.

'Oh, you mean Nash's, sir,' returned the post-mistress. 'Take the first turning to the right and keep round by the Tavistock Hotel, and you will find it easily. The terrace faces the sea.'

'Thank you; that's plain as a pikestaff, and I may as well make tracks,' but as the stranger moved away from the counter Valerie looked at him with the keenest scrutiny.

He was rather a thickset young man, not tall, but well built, and with a frame more suggestive of strength than grace. His sunburnt face might have belonged to a sailor; he had a rough reddish moustache, which concealed his mouth, and he had tilted his straw hat back, so that Valerie could see the rusty colour of his closely-cropped hair.

It was a manly face, though by no means handsome, and it was sufficiently like the photograph which Pansy had once shown her to convince her that it belonged to

Gurth Fordham. Yes, it was certainly he, and he had come four-and-twenty hours before they expected him. In spite of the heat Valerie grew quite cold from nervousness; she must speak to him—there was nothing else to be done, and as he passed her she cleared her throat and looked at him so intently that he stopped and regarded her with some surprise.

'Did you speak to me, madam?' he asked civilly.

'No,' returned Valerie hurriedly, 'but I heard you mention my name. I am Mrs. Thurston, and I cannot help thinking that you must be Mr. Fordham'; but she was sure of it when she saw the stranger's somewhat heavy features lit up by a beaming smile. When Gurth Fordham smiled his rugged moustache seemed to lift in the drollest way, and displayed his strong white teeth, and a laugh puckered up his face into a hundred wrinkles. When Valerie made her little speech, two big ungloved hands seized hers in a sudden vice.

'By Jove, I am in luck's way! To think I have stumbled on you like this! As I was not sure of my bearings, I thought I would turn in here and ask the way to Beaufort Terrace,' and then he gave her poor hands a harder grip. 'I am glad and proud, that I am, Mrs. Thurston, to make your acquaintance.'

'Shall we walk round to Beaufort Terrace?' suggested Valerie, for she was keenly sensible that Mr. Fordham's enthusiasm and delight were attracting people's attention. 'It is close by,' and as he assented somewhat eagerly, she led the way out of the post office.

'We did not expect you until to-morrow,' she observed as they walked up the street together. 'Pansy sent a telegram to Roadside, which the servant was to give you.'

'I never got it,' he returned, and his face clouded a little. 'I thought, as we arrived a day earlier, that I would run over to Wycombe unawares. I was a bit flattened when the girl told me you were down here, but I just took the next train back to London, and here I am, and all's well that ends well—that's my motto, Mrs. Thurston.'

He spoke in such a cheery tone that Valerie's heart quite warmed to him. She liked his clear straightforward look; he had rather wide-open brown eyes, but their expression was frank and true; though his clothes were not well cut, and there was more than a touch of Colonial roughness about him, he looked like a gentleman.

'He is not polished,' she said to herself, 'and I daresay he is not clever, but he is an honest man, and Nature intended him for a gentleman,' and Valerie, who was one of the most fastidious of women, felt quite a desire to take Gurth Fordham under her wing. The letters she had read had already predisposed her in his favour. 'If only Pansy could bring herself to care for him a little,' thought Valerie, 'things would not be so hopeless'; but in her heart she knew they were hopeless. Pansy had no love to give to the man who had worshipped her for so many years.

On his side Gurth Fordham felt himself strongly attracted to the sweet-looking woman who was treating him with such kindly graciousness; he even overcame the embarrassment he had hitherto felt at mentioning his sweetheart's name. 'I suppose we shall find Miss Thurston in the house?' he asked a little shyly; then Valerie started.

'Oh no, she is on the beach with little Philippa. I had promised to join her there. Will you come with me,

or would you rather wait for us in the house?' Then Gurth gave an odd laugh.

'I think I have waited long enough,' he returned with a touch of sadness. 'Nothing wears a man more. I would rather go with you, if you don't mind, Mrs. Thurston, though it is a bit droll our meeting out of doors like this. When I used to picture it,' he continued slowly, 'it was always in the pear-tree walk,—that was where we parted,—or in the Canon's library. Oh, the poor Canon! I was sorely cut up when the news reached me. We were great friends, he and I, quite chummy, in fact. Poor old chap. And he was such a grand preacher too.'

Valerie felt the tears rise to her eyes. This simple expression of sympathy touched her to the heart. 'He thought a great deal of you,' she said in a low voice, and then, as they had reached the Martello tower, she stopped to reconnoitre.

The beach was quite deserted; the tide was going out, and only Philippa's solitary little figure could be discerned on a strip of sand left dry by the receding waves. For a moment Valerie was unable to see Pansy, until she caught sight of something black on the other side of the breakwater; then she turned hurriedly to Mr. Fordham.

'I am going to ask you a favour. Will you let me leave you for a few minutes? Pansy is there. I can see her dress, but I am afraid of startling her. She is very nervous and excitable,—she always was,—and it will be best for me to tell her you have come.'

'Do you think so?' and Gurth Fordham looked as though he had received a douche of cold water; 'my dear lady, it must be as you think best.'

'I will not keep you long. Thank you. Yes, I am

sure it will be best,' and then Valerie quickly made her way to the beach, while Gurth watched her from the Parade.

'She is a real English gentlewoman,' he said to himself, as he paced restlessly up and down; 'she is about as good as they make them. Pansy never told me how pretty she was. Why, she is quite a young woman. I should like Mollie to see her. Mollie would think a deal of her. But I wish, I just wish she would have let me have my sweetheart to myself; it is taking the cream off the milk to tell her a fellow's coming.'

Valerie was thankful that she had come alone, when she gained a nearer view of the forlorn little figure seated on the breakwater. The black gown looked more draggled than ever, as though its edges had been drawn through a slimy pool, and in the listless hands there was a long brown riband of seaweed, which Phil had just brought her. At the sound of Valerie's footsteps she turned round, but there was no welcoming smile on her face.

'You have been so long, Marmee,' she said fretfully, 'and I am so tired of this place, and I did not like to move for fear of missing you.' The blue eyes had a heavy, strained look in them. 'I am beginning to hate the sea; it is so monotonous,' but Valerie's only answer was to take the wet flapping seaweed out of her hands and throw it away. The action surprised Pansy.

'Why do you do that?' she said rather crossly. 'Phil asked me to take care of it for her; she wanted to "crack bubbles," as she calls it.'

'It was spoiling your frock, Pansy dear. I never saw you in such a state before. Let me put your hat straight,' but as she tried to smooth the rough brown locks Pansy drew herself sharply away.

'How absurd you are, Marmee!' she exclaimed. 'Do you suppose that seagull cares whether I am tidy or not, for there is nothing human in sight.'

'Don't be too sure of that, my darling,' returned Valerie in a voice so tender and pitying that Pansy started with a quick prevision of evil.

'What do you mean?' she asked faintly, but she knew very well what was meant.

'Yes, dear, he is here. He was in the post office when I was buying stamps; but I forgot, I never bought them after all. He was asking the way to Beaufort Terrace, and I knew him and told him who I was, and we walked down to the Parade together. Dear child, do let me try and straighten you before he sees you.' But Pansy, who had grown strangely white, threw out her hands with a curious little gesture of defiance.

'No, let him see me just as I am. I will not be smoothed for any man's eyes. If Gurth wants me he must take me exactly as he finds me. Perhaps then he will not want me,' she muttered as she turned away.

Pansy was simply impossible, and Valerie felt positively sick at heart as she slowly retraced her steps.

Mr. Fordham hurried to meet her. 'She expects me? I may go to her?' he asked breathlessly.

'Yes, you may go to her,' but Valerie added no further words. What was she to say to him? She could not tell him that disappointment and disillusion awaited him, that the girl he had wooed so patiently for six years was breaking her heart with longing for her freedom, that the sight of his honest face would be hateful to her.

'Alban, are you sorry for your child now?' she whispered as she walked down to the strip of sand where Phil was throwing stones in the sea.

The girl was still standing in the same attitude as Gurth climbed the breakwater and advanced quickly towards her.

In speaking of this interview long afterwards Pansy said that she felt that moment as though she were in some terrible nightmare. A sort of paralysis affected her limbs; she could not move a step, and even her arms seemed glued to her side. A strange vertigo oppressed her, and the long stony ridge of the beach seemed to rise like a mountain before her eyes. Then it sank suddenly, and two strong arms were round her.

At that moment it may be doubted whether Gurth noticed anything. As he had climbed the breakwater his quick glance had told him that this part of the beach was deserted and that they were virtually alone. When a man has waited and worked in the face of deadly difficulties for all those years, as Gurth Fordham had waited, and the supreme moment of his life had come, he would not be likely to hesitate. He lifted her off her feet as though she were an infant, and drew her under the shelter of the breakwater. 'Little Heartsease, my own little Heartsease,' he said tenderly, but his voice was husky with deep feeling. 'I have you at last—I have you safely at last'; and then, as though words failed him, he kissed her cold cheek and lips with passionate tenderness; but when Pansy shrank from his caresses and hid her face against his rough coat he misconstrued the action. He thought, poor fellow, that she was nestling of her own accord to her affianced husband, and his big hand pressed the brown head closer to him.

'Ay, you are safe there, little bird,' he said with a happy laugh; 'you made your nest there long ago,

and it has been waiting for you ever since. Good heavens!' he continued, tremulously, 'to think it is six years since I said good-bye to my sweetheart in the pear-tree walk. Do you remember it, dear? You had a white gown and a posy of blue forget-me-nots in your waist-band, and I thought they matched your eyes, and I asked you to give me some. I have them here still,' tapping himself on the chest.

Did he notice that she had said no word to him, and that she only kept her face hidden as he talked on?

'I can see your little fingers putting the forget-me-nots in my coat now. "They will tell you that I am thinking of you, Gurth, and that I shall be true and faithful to you all my life." These were your very words. Good Lord! to think that a rough fellow like me should have such a sweetheart to keep true to him through all the muddles of life. It is a miracle, that is what it is, darling—a miracle of miracles,' and Gurth pulled his tawny moustache as though in despair of expressing his feelings.

CHAPTER XXVII

'IT IS A LIFE'S GRATITUDE I OWE HER'

> 'Ah me! the bitterness of such revolt,
> All impotent, all baleful, and all hate,
> That kicks and breaks itself against the bolt
> Of an imprisoning fate,
> And vainly shakes, and cannot shake the gate.'
>
> CHRISTINA ROSSETTI.

A NERVOUS shiver passed through Pansy's slight frame as she heard this speech. Was her tongue paralysed too? she wondered. An old fairy story she had once read in her childhood came back to her memory of a princess who was turned into stone by a wicked enchantress, only her heart was still living, and though she lacked speech and expression she could feel and suffer. Was the gruesome tale to be told again in her case? And then with a great effort she broke silence; but her first words were hardly responsive, and they came faintly through her dry lips—'I am so tired, Gurth; may I sit down?'

'May you? Why, what a thoughtless old blockhead of a chap I am,' returned Gurth remorsefully. 'Look, there is a dry bit of wall there, and room for me to sit alongside of you,' and then he patted her small hand with an attempt at playfulness. 'I have been

kept at a distance long enough, haven't I, Pansy? My word, when a fellow has had thousands of miles between him and his sweetheart for all these years he will hardly put up with half a dozen yards at last,' and then his voice changed and a little trouble crept into his gladness. 'But here I am, talking about my own feelings, and I have hardly heard your voice and I have scarce had a look at you yet,' which was the truth, for Pansy had kept her face hidden. Then she turned her head and looked at him with a pitiful attempt at a smile.

'Well,' she said, with a touch of her old recklessness, 'do you see me now? I told you in my last letter that I had grown old and ugly, and I was right—I was right,' with a dreary note of triumph in her voice.

'No,' he said slowly, 'I am not going to endorse that. You will always be pretty enough in my eyes; but you are not well, you are a bit thinner, sweetheart, and graver, and maybe more of a woman—.' But here Gurth paused as though he were at a loss to account for a certain indefinable change which he now perceived in her. Gurth, in his hard-working self-denying life, had known little of the society of women. His sister's companionship and the interest he felt in his nephews and nieces had enlivened a somewhat solitary existence. At his sister's tearful entreaties he had consented to spend the last few years under her roof and to make one of the household, but though he liked and respected his brother-in-law, and his sister was very dear to him, he had felt that he had not really belonged to them. 'When a man gets into the thirties he wants his own roof-tree,' he said once to his brother-in-law. 'You and Mollie have been as good as gold to me, but I should relish my bread better if I could see my wife's face opposite to me.'

'Gurth's about right there,' observed Harry Dunbar as he repeated this speech to his wife, 'and I'd have felt the same in his place. I am sorry for the old chap; he is going on for forty, and it has been all ups and downs with him. I am not his age yet by a year or two, and I have got you and all these kiddies, and he has to look on at the show and grin and pretend he likes it. And I will tell you what, Polly; I am glad he has made up his mind to take that house and make tracks for England, for girls are kittle cattle, and it is as well to hitch them up tight, and then you may be sure of them.'

Gurth, in his masculine ignorance, felt dimly perplexed by Pansy's appearance in the early days of their engagement; he had almost been scared by her daintiness and trimness of apparel. How often he had called her his 'blue-eyed princess'! 'You are too fine and delicate for the likes of me,' he had said, half jestingly; but how proud he had felt of her grace and refinement!

He remembered the description he had written to his sister in the first days of his bliss. 'I suppose some folk would not call Pansy pretty,' he wrote, 'but I would not change her with the finest beauty in the world. She is little and pale, but her eyes are as blue as the sea when the sun is shining on it, and sometimes they darken and remind me of sapphires, and her hair is just the colour of a ripe chestnut; but there, I shall never make you see her, and her lightness, and her pretty ways, and the fun that is always bubbling over the surface.

'I wish I did not feel such a rough, uncouth fellow beside her. When I told her the children called me Bear, she laughed and clapped her hands with delight.

"I must call you Bear, too," she said, "and teach you to dance for me," and all the rest of the day she called me Bear.

'I wish you could see her dresses, Mollie; you would learn a thing or two. There is a white one—all lace and ruffles—and she looks such a darling in it; she wore it at the Deanery garden-party, and no one could hold a candle to her,' and so on, and so on; and Mary Dunbar cried a little over the letter.

'He is very much in love, poor old boy,' she said to herself; 'but I shall not show Harry the letter, it is meant for my eyes alone.' For in spite of her homeliness, Mrs. Dunbar was a true gentlewoman at heart, and all the rest of the day the thought of the girl with the sea-blue eyes—who was Gurth's sweetheart—haunted her persistently.

But it was no daintily-clad princess who sat beside Gurth on the breakwater, only a wan-faced girl in an old draggled gown, with restless eyes and twitching lips, and hands that felt cold as death to his touch.

'You have been ill surely, dear,' he went on, 'and I never knew it'; but Pansy shook her head.

'No, I have not been ill,' she returned slowly. 'Dear father's death last year was a great shock to me, and I was not strong for some time, but I am all right now,' and then, as though his anxious affectionate gaze were more than she could endure, she said hastily, 'You and Marmee have made friends, I hear.'

'Mrs. Thurston?—oh yes!' and his face lighted up in an instant; 'she is a dear, kind lady, and I took to her at once. Somehow,' went on Gurth, 'I always imagined your stepmother was a sort of motherly woman, but one would almost take you two for sisters.'

'People have often told us that,' returned Pansy,

'and after all she is not ten years older, so she might very easily be my sister. I am glad you like her, Gurth, she is such a darling. I loved her from the very first.'

'Then I shall love her too,' returned Gurth squarely. "Your people shall be my people," did not some one once say that? but I am a poor hand at quoting. Do you remember how often you used to set me right, and how the poor old Canon would laugh at me?'

Pansy winced; what was the use of recalling those days. She had lived in a different world then—when the sun shone, and she gathered roses and the thorns did not prick her, and life was strong and sweet, like new wine; she had not been caught like some blundering wild thing in a cruel trap that held her fast.

Pansy was trying with all the force of her strong will to rouse herself from the dreary stupefaction that oppressed her, and to assume something of her old sprightliness; but the effort was too great, for this evening their rôles seemed reversed; it was Gurth who had become the talker, and who was too excited to keep silence.

'It was a sore day for me when I heard the Canon was gone,' he went on, holding the girl's nervous, fluttering fingers in his warm grasp. 'Mollie brought the letter down to the office, and as the fellows were away, I had a downright cry over it. It makes a man feel bad to know his sweetheart is in trouble and that he cannot get at her, but I made up my mind then that I would write and ask you to come out to me.'

'But I could not come, Gurth, it was impossible. I could not have left Marmee.'

'People have done impossible things before now,' he returned, with a touch of shrewdness that almost

startled her; 'but of course I understood that you were afraid of the voyage. It was rather a large order, was it not, dear, to go to the other end of the world? Well, there's nought to say on this subject. I have come from Melbourne to fetch my wife, and I am going to take her back with me, and I would have travelled the whole world round with a pack on my back, like that fellow in the *Pilgrim's Progress*, and fought all the bad goblins too, to be sitting here by the side of my little Eyebright, as the Canon used to call you.'

Pansy released one of her hands and put it up to her throat, as though she were choking; she wanted to scream, to cry out to him to be silent, and not hurt and crush her with all these protestations. Were his eyes blinded, that he could not see the change in her! Was he deaf, that the coldness of her voice never struck him! How dare he call her by her old pet name—"little Eyebright"—and yet he had often used it before, and she had felt no anger! Oh to be rid of him for five minutes, to be alone with her misery, and get strength to pull herself together! The strain was too great, she felt as though fortitude was forsaking her, when, to her relief, she saw Valerie coming slowly over the sands towards them.

'Phil is tired, and I am going to take her in,' she said, as soon as her voice could reach them. 'There is no need for you to disturb yourselves'—Valerie's politeness obliged her to say this—'supper will not be ready yet.'

Pansy was secretly exasperated to see that her stepmother took it for granted that Gurth should spend the remainder of the evening at Beaufort Terrace.

'I thought Marmee would have helped me out of it better than that,' thought the girl, with sudden irritation,

as she slipped off the breakwater. 'I am tired, and it will be better for us all to come back now,' she said abruptly; 'the beach is a dreary place in the evening'; but she would not take Gurth's arm as they climbed up the stony ridges. 'I am not used to it,' she said rather ungraciously, and though Gurth was silent, Valerie was sure that he was a little hurt.

Valerie had to go to a shop or two to make preparations for their unexpected guest. On her return she took counsel with Miss Nash. She found that Mr. Fordham had gone round to the hotel for half an hour, but as Phil was waiting for her, she could not go in search of Pansy. 'She will be better alone,' she thought; 'no one can help her, she must just go through it by herself.' Then she tried to banish her uneasiness and to give her attention to Phil.

Phil's nerves had strengthened, and she offered no objection when Valerie said tentatively that the folding-doors must be closed.

'Oh, I don't mind one bit,' returned Phil sleepily. 'I shall hear your voices quite plainly, and see the light through the chinks, and it is never really dark. Good-night, Marmee dear.' And Valerie withdrew with an easy mind. Her care and tenderness had not been wasted: the child was recovering her bodily and mental health; the blighting influence that had hindered growth was replaced by an atmosphere of kindly sympathy and patient love, in which the tender little flower expanded and put out fresh shoots. Mr. Nugent would have a sweet daughter to be his companion by and by, but the thought of losing her gave Valerie a keen pang.

'First Pansy, and then Phil,' she would say to herself; 'and by and by my boy will leave me and go out into the world,' and sometimes she would picture

herself—a gray-haired, lonely woman—still living at Roadside, reading Pansy's letters in the tiny verandah, or on summer evenings pottering among her rose-trees. 'Well, what if it should be so?' she had said to herself more than once. 'There are worse things in life than solitude and old age. "At eventide there shall be light." Thank God for that! Not the hot glaring light of noonday, which comes with life's fitful fever, but the calm sweet light, so mellow and clear, that speaks of rest and peace when the day's work is over and the tired labourer goes home'; and Valerie would try to take comfort in such thoughts.

When she went into the next room she found the supper table laid, and Mr. Fordham standing by the window. At the sound of the closing door he looked round.

'I thought it was Pansy,' he said slowly, and his hands played restlessly with the blind-tassels. 'I hurried back not to lose a moment, but I have waited a long time and she has not come yet.'

'Pansy is getting ready for supper,' returned Valerie, with assumed cheerfulness. 'She got so wet down on the sands. I must not ask you what you think of her. The dear child is not at her best to-night.'

To her surprise Gurth re-echoed her words. 'No, she is not at her best,' he returned rather heavily. 'I am doubting, if the poor old Canon saw her to-night, whether he would call her his little sunbeam. She looks as though she has come through trouble and she could not shake it off somehow. It troubles me, Mrs. Thurston, it troubles me sorely to see my little girl so changed. I feel as if I would give all I am worth to see her as she was in the old courting days.'

'Oh, you must not be too anxious,' returned Valerie

hurriedly. 'You must give her time—you have taken her by surprise, and she feels shy and strange. You see, Mr. Fordham,' stumbling a little over her words in her anxiety to give him comfort, 'six years is a long period of time, and you and Pansy have seen very little of each other. She was a mere child when the engagement took place, and, if you will allow me to say so, you have still a great deal to learn of each other's character.' Valerie had compelled herself to say this. Pansy's manner that evening made her think that it would be only right to open his eyes a little, but his answer surprised her.

'I don't hold with you, Mrs. Thurston,' he said quietly; 'though you mean it kindly, I am sure of that, my dear lady. I have nought to learn about my little girl that I have not known all these years. I made up my mind about her that day when I saw her pranking and preening herself, like a white pigeon, before the long glass in the drawing-room. She did not know any one was in the room, and it was the prettiest sight to watch her. I said to myself then, "Gurth Fordham, my fine fellow, if you can marry, that girl must be your wife."'

'Yes, yes, I know'—but Gurth had more to say.

'I saw her most days, and sometimes, when I had plenty of luck, we were together morning, noon, and night, for it was a gay time at Wycombe, and there were dinners and parties and picnics, and I took care to accept all the invitations. I soon found out all I wanted to know,' went on Gurth, with the simplicity that seemed natural to him. 'She was only a young thing, that's true, frolicsome as a kitten and as full of life, but at the bottom she was sweet and sound, and for all her fun there was real grit in her.'

'You are right,' returned Valerie with a sigh, but her eyes rested very kindly on him. 'She has been a dear child to me all these years.'

'To be sure she has,' he remarked cheerily. 'She is one to do her duty through thick and thin. Not a girl in a hundred would have stuck to a fellow when he was down on his luck as my sweetheart stuck to me. Her faith and pluck have been my saving, Mrs. Thurston. They gave me strength to get my head above water. Well, the tide has turned now, and, thank God, my wife will never have to face poverty, but it is a life's gratitude I owe her for not letting go my hand when the trouble nearly broke me.'

Gurth was growing quite eloquent under the influence of Valerie's quiet sympathy; but the next minute a strange brightness came into his eyes, for Pansy was coming towards them. She had brushed her hair, and the brown coils were as smooth and glossy as usual, and she had put on her pretty barège dress with its dainty ruffles, and though she still looked pale and hollow-eyed, there was some resemblance to the old Pansy. Gurth held out his hand to her in unconscious tenderness, but she did not appear to notice it, as she flitted round the supper table, putting a touch here and there.

'I am sure Gurth must be starving, Marmee,' she said, with an attempt at her old manner, 'and it is really quite late.' Then, as Valerie obeyed this hint and led the way to the table, Pansy exclaimed, with a semblance of gaiety which scarcely rang true, 'We have had no time to kill the fatted calf, Gurth; you will have to content yourself with cold lamb and lobster and salad,' and Pansy was so busy attending to their guest, and dressing the salad in the way her father liked, that she

had no time to eat any supper herself; but when Gurth pointed out this fact to her, she only gave a shrill, mirthless little laugh.

'One cannot always be eating,' she observed; 'the surprise has frightened my appetite away. Go on with your supper, Gurth, and when you have finished we will go out on the balcony as usual, and you shall tell us about Mrs. Dunbar and the children. You will like that, will you not, Marmee? I want to hear about them all, and especially about Tina. Tina is my favourite, I think,' remarked Pansy, a little absently.

CHAPTER XXVIII

'HIS FATHER WAS A BLACKSMITH'

'Should one of us remember,
And one of us forget;
I wish I knew what each will do,
But who can tell us yet.'

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI.

IT has been justly remarked that 'the comic and the tragic lie close together, inseparable like light and shadow,' and even in moments of deep depression one realises the truth of this saying. Sad-eyed mourners looking out of coach windows on their way to the cemetery have been known to smile at some grotesque incident, some unforeseen and comic interlude in the ever-changing pageant of the street; while dying men have been moved to momentary mirth; for the sense of humour, which is one of man's choicest gifts, when once implanted in a kindly soil, is not easy to eradicate.

Valerie was suffering a perfect martyrdom that evening on Pansy's account. It may be right to bear one another's burdens, but even the Apostle does not tell us that the duty is to be easily or comfortably performed, and some of us may pant under the unaccustomed load. Valerie was putting herself into Pansy's place. She needed no actual experience to realise the terror, the

girlish revolt, the desire to escape an inevitable fate, and yet in spite of her very real sympathy there were moments when she bit her lips to keep back a smile. Pansy had schooled herself to act a part, she saw that plainly ; she had rallied from her state of utter collapse, and now the power of speech had returned to her she was determined there should be no awkward silence at every pause of the conversation. Her voice was heard vibrant, less sweet than usual, breaking into quick, abrupt sentences, while her restless fingers crumbled her bread or plaited the table-cloth into fan-like folds. Valerie looked at the puckers afterwards rather sadly. 'Poor child,' she said to herself.

Valerie reluctantly followed them out on the balcony, for she saw that Pansy was determined not to undergo the ordeal of another *tête-à-tête* that night. She sat by silently while Gurth was questioned and cross-questioned about his sister and the children. Gurth fell readily enough into the trap. He thought Pansy's interest was genuine. He was always willing to talk about Tom, who was his favourite, and then there was his godson, Frank. 'Frankie is growing up such a nice little chap,' he went on ; 'he takes after Harry. Leonard is his mother's boy, but Frankie follows his father about like a little dog. "When I am a big man like Bear I shall have a red moustache too," just fancy the small kid saying that. They all call me Bear. Mollie scolds them a bit for it sometimes, but, bless you, they will never alter. "Uncle is such a nasty knuckly word," as Tina said—we think she meant ugly—"he is just our dear darling old Bear."'

Now and then Gurth seem inclined to wander off to the subject of the new house in Broadley Street, but Pansy always recalled him peremptorily. 'We will not

talk about that to-night,' and she pretended to stifle a yawn; but she repented this ruse, for it gave Gurth an opportunity of intercepting the little soft hand.

'You must not let me tire you, darling,' he whispered, 'I could sit here all night telling you about Mollie and the youngsters, but I can't expect you to feel the same.'

'Pansy is very tired, Mr. Fordham,' observed Valerie, coming generously to the rescue. 'After a good night's rest she will be better able to enjoy your society.'

What hypocrites even the best of women are. Valerie uttered this platitude knowing in her heart that she was telling a meaningless falsehood; no amount of repose would make Gurth Fordham's society enjoyable to Pansy in her present state of mind. She went inside after this and left Gurth to make his adieux in peace, but he was so long in following her that she grew uneasy at last.

It was a relief when he stepped into the room, looking flushed and blinking at the light like a big owl. 'Thank you for letting me have her to myself for a bit,' he said, as he shook hands; 'every moment was worth its weight in gold. You understand, do you not, Mrs. Thurston, that there are things one wants to say, only it is not easy to find words.'

'Oh yes, I understand,' returned Valerie gently, and then she went with him to the door, and stood there for a few minutes listening to his receding footsteps and looked across the empty waste to the dark sea-line beyond.

'I like him,' were her first words to Pansy when she joined her on the balcony; 'he is simple and honest, and I am sure he has a good heart,' and then she

paused and said slowly, 'and he loves you very dearly.'

'Oh, that is just it,' returned Pansy vehemently. She was lying back in her chair with her arms under her head, and her small white face uplifted to the dusky summer sky. There was a long cloud across it and a tiny star glimmered through one of the jagged rents. 'I wonder if people live and love and suffer up there,' she had said to herself a moment before. 'Oh, that is just it,' she repeated, 'if he only cared for me less. But I feel like a beggar who is longing to wander away with his wallet and staff, and who is compelled to be clothed in purple and fed with dainties that his palate loathes.'

'My dear child!'

'Oh, it is only an allegory,' returned Pansy recklessly, 'but when Gurth made love to me I felt such a mean thing. He is giving me gold—real gold—and I have nothing for him but tarnished gilding. If I could only be true and tell him so. If I could purge my soul of this mass of deceit and lies; but I must not, I must not, or I should break his heart.'

'Hearts are not broken quite so easily, Pansy. He would suffer, of course, and you would suffer too, but he is too strong a man to let himself be crushed.'

'Do you think so?' and Pansy heaved a weary little sigh.

'I do think so,' returned Valerie firmly, for she began to hope that the thin end of the wedge was at last effecting an entrance; 'but no amount of present suffering could justify you in deceiving Mr. Fordham any longer. How often have I repeated those words to you, "We must not do evil that good may come."'

'Yes, I have heard those words before,' replied

Pansy calmly. There was something ominous to Valerie in the girl's strange quietness. The lamplight streaming through the window showed every change of expression distinctly; her eyes had a tired buffeted look in them, but there were rigid lines round the small mouth. 'One is offered a choice of evils sometimes,' went on Pansy. 'When everything is dark it is not easy to select one's shades. We look at things from a different standpoint, Marmee; you are putting yourself in my place, and you want to save me from marrying a man I do not really love, and I am thinking of poor Gurth, who has believed in me, and trusted me all these years, and who has come all these thousands of miles to fetch me.'

'Dear Pansy, I am thinking of him too. What have I just told you?—that I like him, and trust him implicitly. I have only known him these few hours, and yet there is something about him that appeals to me. I do not believe that any woman need fear to entrust her happiness to his keeping.'

'Thank you, Marmee dear. I like you to say that, and it is true—true as Gospel; do you think I do not know that—that I am blind to his goodness. I like Gurth, nay, I love him, but not with the affection that a man has a right to demand from his future wife. I see his virtues, but I see his faults too—oh, so plainly.'

'We all have our faults, dearest.'

'Yes, we all have them; but in Gurth's case they are more defects than faults—his bigness, and his homeliness, and his odd little tricks of speech, irritate and annoy me. When he said on the beach, "I will come and sit alongside of you," I felt as though I hated him; I just wanted to push him away. That is why I call myself a mean beggar.'

'Dear Pansy, wait one moment. Gurth is not changed, surely; he was big and homely when you promised to marry him all these years ago. I have your letters still. You called him the navvy, and more than once you mentioned his want of culture.'

'Yes, I know,' in a low voice, 'but I was so young, and he was so kind to me; and then father liked him so much, and everybody was talking about the millionaire, and though I never thought much about money, I suppose I saw things through a golden haze. If he had stayed longer, if I had seen more of him, I might have grown tired. Oh, Marmee, what is the use of raking up the past; it is only the present and the future that concern us now.'

'That is true, and I am to understand that you are tied for life to a good honest man, for whom you have no real affection, whom you do not even regard as a gentleman?'

Valerie was as merciless as the surgeon when he takes the knife to amputate the diseased limb. Pansy winced, and the blood rushed into her face.

'I never said so,' she exclaimed angrily; 'you ought not to twist my words in that fashion.'

'I beg your pardon, dear. In my opinion Mr. Fordham is a true gentleman, though one must own he is a rough specimen; but of course if you compare him with Mr. Nugent.' Valerie never knew what put Mr. Nugent in her head that moment, but the shaft went home. Pansy started up from her seat.

'Why do you say that, Marmee?' she asked desperately, 'and I was thinking of him and the Dean all supper-time; even while I talked I was making comparisons between Gurth and them. It is the way they walk and hold themselves, and their quiet

speech, and even the turn of their sentences, that make one admire them so. When Gurth walked across the room, the floor seemed to shake under him; and then there are things he has never been taught—you went out of the room twice, Marmee, and he never opened the door for you.'

Valerie was silent out of sheer pity. She had noticed the omission herself with some surprise. It was all too true; Gurth Fordham, with all his merits, was certainly lacking in conventional polish.

To make things worse and more unbearable, Pansy had lived all her young life in the exclusive and refined society of a Cathedral close. The men with whom she had associated were all gentlemen and scholars, and she had been used to the pure intonation, and the faultless pronunciation of students who reverenced and made a study of their mother tongue. It was little marvel, then, that Gurth's rough homeliness should have come upon her like a shock.

The next moment Pansy stamped her foot. 'There, I wish I had bitten my tongue out before I had said all that. Poor fellow, as though he could help his bringing-up. Do you know, Marmee, his parents were quite common people; his father was a blacksmith.'

'Did he tell you so himself?' asked Valerie, concealing her surprise at this statement. She saw that Pansy had reached the point when her emotional nature was in urgent need of expression, when it was torture to her to keep silence. At such moments the sympathy of some human friend is as a cup of cold water to the thirsty traveller.

'Yes, he told me so,' replied the girl. 'It was the day after I had given him my promise, and we were walking to Staple Grove; it was such a lovely evening,

and I felt so happy and excited, that I could have danced along the road. We passed the Sheppertons in their waggonette, and I thought how Lydia and Jessie would envy me if they knew—oh, what silly thoughts they seem now—and presently we came to the forge, and I asked Gurth to stop for a few minutes, while I watched the blacksmith shoe an old cart-horse, and when we went on, he said quietly: "I think you ought to know—I told the Canon—for there must be no secrets between you and me, that my father was only a working blacksmith, and when I was a small kid, I used to be down at the forge for hours, watching the sparks fly as he hammered out the red-hot iron." Somehow I was rather taken aback, Marmee, when Gurth said this.'

'Yes, dear, I can understand that.'

'I tried not to show it, and Gurth went on as though he were not a bit ashamed of it. "We lived in the long white cottage close by the forge, and though I was such a little chap, I can remember father coming in to his meals in his shirt-sleeves"; all these years I have never forgotten that speech of Gurth's; and there was another he made, later on, that seemed graven on my memory. He had been telling me about his sister Mary, and how she had looked after him ever since their mother's death; she is four years older than Gurth. "I tell Mollie sometimes when she is dressed up fine for Government House," he went on, "that no one who saw her in her satin gown, sitting at ease in her grand parlour, would think she was the old Mollie Fordham who used to bake and brew and wash in the white cottage alongside the forge."' Pansy finished this sentence in a faltering small voice, as though each word had been an effort.

'I think I admire Mr. Fordham all the more now you have told me this,' observed Valerie; 'he must have a fine nature, for neither prosperity nor adversity has spoiled him;' and then she said to herself, 'Alban knew it, but he never told me,—if a blacksmith's son is a millionaire, nobody cares if his father sat down to his meals in his shirt-sleeves; it is the way of the world. Then she put her hand on Pansy's shoulder. 'Do not talk any more, dear child, you will need your strength for to-morrow. Mr. Fordham tells me that he will be round early'—then Pansy shivered and rose from her seat.

'I want to go on talking. I should like to stay here all night and watch for the day breaking over the sea, just you and I together, Marmee; but I will not be so selfish—you are so dear and good to me'; and then she flung her arms round her step-mother's neck.

'If I could only help you, my darling.'

'Ah! if you only could; if I could see with your eyes; but I shall never be wise and patient like you. I am only a poor unhappy little blunderer who has made a life's mistake and can never set it right'; and when she had said this, Pansy turned away and left the room.

Again Valerie passed a miserable wakeful night, revolving the events of the day, and going over and over her conversation with Pansy. Nothing that the girl had said could change her fixed and unalterable conviction that it would be a sin for Pansy to marry Gurth Fordham. She did not love him, she never had loved him; but now her girlish glamour had passed away, she was even more indifferent to him; his defects seemed to her more glaring. Their natures were certainly antagonistic. Pansy, critical, fastidious, and keenly alive to the minor morals of life, would be

no true mate to the honest colonial merchant with his massive simplicity and his disregard of the conventions of society; and their marriage would only bring wretchedness to both.

'They are each good,' she said to herself; 'Pansy is as honest and straightforward as he is; but for all that they are too utterly dissimilar—their environment has been different; they really do not speak each other's language.' And then, as she pondered over Pansy's self-will and reckless generosity, for she saw plainly that she would give herself to the man, it came into her mind that she would speak herself to Mr. Fordham, and make him understand the struggle that Pansy was undergoing.

'She is going to marry you, but she has ceased to love you, though she will never tell you so—she will be true to her bond; it is for you to set her free,'—some such words as these must be said by her. But even as the idea fevered her, and the magnitude of the effort seemed to loom more darkly before her imagination, a sudden recollection turned her cold with dismay.

Alas! the knot of the difficulty was not to be cut by her in this ruthless fashion; she remembered that Pansy had once made her promise that she would never take upon herself to write or speak to Gurth Fordham on this subject—how could she have forgotten that conversation and Pansy's concluding words—

'I shall feel safe now, for you always keep your promises, Marmee, so I need not mind what I say to you; no one must interfere between me and Gurth.' No, she could not betray Pansy's confidence; some other way must be found out of the difficulty.

CHAPTER XXIX

'I WAS WRONG TO CROW OVER MOLLIE'

'The spirit was silent, but he took
Mortar and stone to build a wall;
He left no loop-hole great or small
Through which my straining eyes might look.'
CHRISTINA ROSSETTI.

WHEN one has passed a wakeful night of heavy brooding and feverish unrest, the first streak of the grey dawn seems like the cool hand of a friend laid lightly on an aching head.

Valerie had a brief refreshing sleep towards morning, and woke to see the tender flush of the eastern sky, and the waves breaking into dimples in the sunshine. The stretch of grass common before the terrace glittered with a million dewdrops; even the coarse sea bents in the hollows of the sand had each its fairy globule. The rosy-fingered goddess of morning walked through the length and breadth of the land, and wherever she moved, hope was in her train.

'There must be a way,' Valerie said to herself, as she drew in a breath of the sweet strong air; 'if one could only be patient and wait for the right clue, there must surely be a way out of the labyrinth.'

But her brief optimism vanished when she saw

Pansy's face,—the girl looked years older, and the lines round the mouth were strongly marked; but this morning her manner forbade any approach to sympathy.

She sat at the breakfast table eating little and talking mere commonplaces; and before the meal was half over she started from her seat.

'I am going down to the beach now,' she said abruptly; 'you and Phil can join me when you are ready.'

'Will you not wait a little?' remonstrated Valerie. 'Mr. Fordham said he should be round early, and it will look so strange for you not to be here when he comes.'

'What nonsense, Marmee,' returned Pansy sharply; 'no one thinks of waiting for any one else at the seaside. Gurth will find me when he wants me; he has only to use his eyes.'

'Shall you be in the usual place?' asked Valerie, taking no notice of Pansy's sharp speech. Then the girl frowned.

'No; I hate the very look of the breakwater. I shall go nearer the downs. Don't trouble yourself about me, Marmee; I am not going to run away or drown myself; I shall work and let Gurth talk to me, and make myself as amiable as possible'; and then Pansy smiled in rather an inscrutable fashion. But she had reckoned without her host, for as she closed the front-door behind her, she came face to face with Gurth.

He had come round the corner at a dashing rate, as though he and old Time were having a wager. He looked trim and alert, and had a tea-rose in his button-hole; and as he caught sight of his fiancèe, his teeth gleamed under his rugged moustache.

'Were you coming to meet me?' he asked, as he took the little hand and put it on his arm. 'I would have come an hour ago, only I thought I'd be in the way. I have bathed and breakfasted, and had a tramp over the downs, for I dare not trust myself within sight of your windows.

'I am a big fool—that is what I am, my darling, and you are bound to laugh at me; but I was just pacing the pavement last night for hours like a sentinel on duty.'

Pansy gave him a startled look as he said this. She had dropped his arm, to his manifest discomposure, and was walking beside him with a proud little air of dignity.

'You and Mrs. Thurston were having a deal of talk,' he went on. 'I could hear your voices quite plainly; once or twice I thought I would call up to you, and let you know I was there, but I was afraid of startling you.'

'And you heard our voices,' she asked faintly.

'Good lack, yes,' he returned with a laugh; 'if I had stood still a moment, I should have heard every word you said; but I took care to keep my distance. What were you talking about, dear? you seemed terribly in earnest. Once I saw you quite plainly; you were holding out your hands as though you saw me standing there in the darkness. I could not have kept silence a moment longer, but as I crossed the road I heard the window close.'

Pansy was silent; if he had heard her reckless speeches! There must be no more evening talks on the balcony. As she remembered her cold heartless criticism, she felt a sudden stab of uneasiness. 'Are you sure you heard nothing, Gurth?' she said, pre-

tending to jest; 'you know listeners hear no good of themselves, and curiosity often gets sorely punished.'

'So the wiseacres say,' he returned with a gentle laugh; 'but I knew I was safe, and that my little girl, bless her sweet face! would have nought but good to say of her sweetheart. It was just heaven to me to walk there and smoke my pipe, and listen to your voice, and to know you were thinking and talking of me,' and then the colour came into his bronzed face, and he gave a quick embarrassed laugh. 'I have told a bit of a fib, too, for half-a-dozen words did come to my ears—"his father was a blacksmith." You said that so clear and loud that I could have jumped to hear it; and then, of course, I made out that you were talking of me.'

Pansy's cheeks were flaming—every word was torture to her.

'To think of you remembering that, darling,' he went on, 'and our talk that day when we saw the old grey horse shoed at the smithy. That was one of the first questions Mollie put to me when I went back —"Does Pansy know about father and the forge, and the white cottage where you and I had our upbringing?" and you should have seen her face when I told her that my sweetheart was too true a lady to heed about the husks and outside of things. "It is the man she cares about, Moll," I said, and how proud and glad I was to say it—"son of a blacksmith or son of an earl, it is all one to her," bless her faithful little heart!'

'It is too hot to walk,' exclaimed Pansy, 'shall we sit down in this patch of shade under the old boat.' But she did not wait for Gurth's assent, as she seated herself and took out her work, while he looked round him rather dubiously.

'There's plenty of shade and quiet farther on,' he observed, 'we are too much in the ruck of people here.' But Pansy could not be coaxed from her position.

'There are people everywhere this time in the day,' she remarked; 'I would rather not move, Gurth.' And her voice was so determined that he gave up the contest, and stretched himself out contentedly on the beach beside her, but his hand closed over her work in rather a forcible fashion.

'There's business to be settled between you and me,' he said with unusual decision in his voice. 'When a man has no time to spare, and his affairs are waiting for him at the other end of the world, he is bound to be a trifle abrupt. I have taken you at your word, dear, and come to fetch you, and now I am waiting to hear you say that you are ready for me.'

'What—what do you mean, Gurth?' Then he tilted his straw hat over his face, with an amused laugh.

'What do I mean? nay, that's a poor sort of joke between you and me, as though you could not guess my meaning, little woman. Mollie tells me when a girl's going to be married, she has heaps of fallals to get. "You must give her time, Gurth," these were Moll's very words; but I just laughed in her face. "There will be no time wanted, Mollie," I said as bold as brass. "I know my sweetheart better than that; she will be ready for me whatever time I come."'

'But Gurth, you do not understand,' faltered Pansy. 'I never supposed that I was to make this sort of preparation—Marmee and I never thought of such a thing. There would be time when you came; that is what we both said,—there would be plenty of time.'

Gurth's face fell; he was evidently unprepared for

this. 'You have not got ready for me?' he ejaculated, unable to believe his ears.

'No, of course not,' rather tremulously; 'why, I only got your letter five weeks ago, and Marmee was away, and I could not get to her; I had just to leave things. You must not mind, Gurth; it won't take long to get the few things I want. I have no money to spend in finery, even if I had the heart to wear it.' But Gurth misunderstood her.

'Oh, I am not blaming you, darling,' he said slowly, 'though I am a bit disappointed, for I see I was wrong to crow over Mollie. There's no need for finery now at all, and we can get you what you want in Melbourne, though maybe we shall pay dearer for things there. The poor Canon's been gone pretty nigh a year, so you will have a white frock or two,' coaxingly. 'Look here, sweetheart, I made up my mind that we should get married before three weeks were over; but if this will hurry you too much, we will put it off another fortnight—but not a day later if I can help it, for I must take berths in the *Roslin Castle*, and she starts in six weeks from to-day.'

Pansy gave a great start as Gurth said this, and the listless little hand he was holding trembled like a live bird in the grasp of the fowler.

'I am not going to run away or to drown myself,' she had said rather flippantly half-an-hour before; but at this moment she felt as though she must do either one or other of these things.

Her death-warrant was signed—nay, worse, it was her life-warrant; in five weeks' time, in five short weeks she must stand before the altar with this man, and vow that, forsaking all others, she would keep to him and him only as long as they two should live. Would

not her tongue cleave to the roof of her mouth before she could utter that lie?

Valerie's strong impassioned words recurred to her memory,—'no amount of present suffering could justify you in deceiving Mr. Fordham any longer'; and again, 'we must not do evil that good may come.' And once before she had told her almost sternly 'that it would be a crime for her to marry Gurth.'

'Am I a criminal or a coward that I am doing this thing?' thought the girl almost wildly; and Gurth was shocked and smitten with remorse when he saw the whiteness of her face.

'There, I have been and scared you,' he said tenderly. 'I am too rough a chap not to bungle things a bit; "it is my sledge-hammer fashion," as Harry would say; but you must not mind my abruptness, darling; my heart is just full of love to you.' And then, in a voice as caressing as a mother might have used to her babe, 'you will be safe with me, dear; not a hair of your head but will be sacred in my eyes. When you are my wife you'll learn how a man cares for the woman he loves and worships.'

A curious undefinable feeling shot through Pansy at these words, a dim ray of hope shone in her tortured soul, but it soon flickered away into blackness again.

Would he teach her to care for him? Would the old dry bones of her buried girlish affection revive and live? Then as she felt the touch of his lips upon her cheek, she shrank back in visible coldness again.

'Oh, Gurth, be careful; we are not alone.'

'Nay,' he said smiling, 'there's not a creature in sight—what a shy bird it is; but then I will not torment you; it is happiness to have you close to me, and even

to touch your dress. You were always a bit stand-offish with me, even in the old times when I called you my blue-eyed princess. You would never let me kiss you except as a great favour, and then only when I asked quite humbly. I remember I made you quite angry once when I would not be put off any longer, and took you in my arms and paid off old scores.'

A dull flush came on Pansy's face; that was the day she had liked Gurth best, when she had been most in love with him. He had lost patience with her girlish caprices, and had shown himself suddenly masterful—yes, she had been angry, but, all the same, she had respected him for his manliness.

At the present moment Gurth was not so intent on his love-making that he lost sight of his chief purpose. His lady-love was coy and a trifle difficult to understand; she had grown shy with him, and would doubtless give him plenty of trouble; but happily his wooing would be brief.

'Shall we say this day five weeks, darling?' he asked, taking her left hand and looking lovingly at the brilliant diamond half-hoop he had placed on her finger so many years before.

'Yes, I suppose so,' gasped Pansy. Then a sudden thought occurred to her, and she cleared her throat nervously. 'Gurth, please, there is something I must say. You know, of course, father told you that I have three hundred a year.'

Gurth nodded. 'Oh, that's all right,' he returned easily; 'the Canon said it would be a nice bit of pin-money for you. I told him that I thought of settling three thousand a year on my wife; but times have changed since then, but it will be your own, Pansy.

I shall have no need to touch it—thank God! I am making a fair income now, and I have a good house in a good position ready for my sweetheart.'

Gurth's eyes looked bright and eager, but Pansy's manner held him in check.

'I am glad to know that,' she said very seriously. 'Gurth, you must not mind, but I shall have to give half my money to Marmee and Ronald. Marmee is so poor, she has only that little house and a hundred and fifty a year; and there's Ron's schooling, and if it were not for my money and the handsome allowance that Mr. Nugent pays for Philippa, poor dear Marmee would not be able to make ends meet.'

'You little darling!' exclaimed Gurth admiringly. 'So this has been troubling you—has it? But you need not trouble your head any more about it. Though I cannot settle three thousand a year on my wife at the present moment, you may take my word for it that I shall be a rich man yet and make my pile. We have struck ile this last journey; but then I must not talk shop to you, it would be just gibberish. All I need say is this, there is enough and to spare for you and me, and the ball is still rolling. Why should not Mrs. Thurston and the boy have all your money? they would be kindly welcome to it.'

Pansy's eyes were smarting with hot, unshed tears. Oh, why was he so kind and good to her? His generosity seemed to smite her in the face like a blow.

'You are very good,' she murmured, holding down her head humbly; 'but I could not do that. Marmee would refuse to take it; we are both very proud, Marmee and I.'

'Nay, what has pride to do with it?' urged her

lover. 'Didn't I tell you they are kindly welcome to it?'

'Yes, Gurth, and I am very grateful to you; but Marmee and I have already settled it. We are to divide it between us—we shall like it better so; there will be enough for my pin-money and frocks—oh, and everything I want,' went on Pansy rather incoherently, and then before he could say another word she had jumped up from her seat.

'There, we have settled everything,' she continued hurriedly, 'and Marmee is coming towards us. Gurth, will you tell her all we have been saying? I will come back presently, but I must be alone for a little.' Pansy flashed a quick look at him, and waved her hand as she half ran, half slid down the shelving beach. Valerie looked at her in some astonishment as she ran past her.

'Why has she gone away, and what have you been saying to her?' she asked anxiously as Gurth came slowly forward; but his answer somewhat reassured her.

'We have been making our plans, Mrs. Thurston; there's no time to lose,' he returned quietly. 'When a man's business is waiting for him, the grass must not grow under his feet. Pansy was a bit shy with me, and I fear I scared her, getting her to name the day before she had got used to me; but she'll come round —she'll come round; if we give her time.'

'To name the day,' repeated Valerie, and she was a little breathless, as though she had been running.

'Oh, we have settled all that,' returned Gurth in a fine off-hand manner. 'It is to be this day five weeks, for I have promised not to hurry her, and she tells me she has not had a single stitch put in. Now you are a

sensible woman, Mrs. Thurston, and you know how to meet a man half way; so I will just state things fairly. I shall take our berths in the *Roslin Castle;* she is to start in six weeks' time. Pansy can get all she needs for the voyage, and I will buy her the rest in Melbourne. She will not get her money's worth out there, for they ask a terrible deal for frocks and that sort of thing; but she might wear sack-cloth for all I shall heed, though I am free to confess that I would cover her with diamonds if I could,' and there was a glow in Gurth's eyes as he said this. Valerie felt almost too overwhelmed to answer—five weeks, and there had been nothing done. She could have groaned over Pansy's perversity and wrong-headedness: in the letter she had so ruthlessly destroyed, there had doubtless been some strong hints given on this very subject; indeed, Gurth's next speech implied as much. 'I made sure she would have been ready for me,' he went on, 'and there would only be the wedding-dress to get. I thought I put things pretty plainly, but I doubt that I bungled my meaning. Pansy will have to sharpen me up a bit,' he continued, and there was a wistful expression in his face. 'I wish for her sake I was brighter and cleverer; but she must take me as she finds me,' finished Gurth with a sigh. Perhaps if he had read Mrs. Thurston's thoughts that moment he would have been surprised and gratified.

'If I had been Pansy I think I could have loved this man,' she was saying to herself; 'he is so honest and so true.'

CHAPTER XXX

'I CALL IT THE BIRD'S NEST'

'There are few people who would not be ashamed of being beloved when they love no longer.'—LA ROCHEFOUCAULD.

'Our grand business is, not to see what lies dimly at a distance, but to do what lies clearly at hand.'—CARLYLE.

LATER on in the evening, as they gathered on the balcony to enjoy the coolness of the breeze after the enervating heat of the day, Gurth Fordham enlarged with much satisfaction on the house he had taken in Broadley Street; but Pansy, who was spent with the emotions which she was vainly trying to curb and repress, could scarcely keep up a semblance of interest in the conversation.

'It is a good house,' he repeated more than once, 'and Broadley Street is a fine, cheerful road. I don't say, mind you, Mrs. Thurston, that it is equal to a mansion in Brabazon Street; but a man would need his six or seven thousand a year to live there, and to keep afloat with the swells. Why, there's Harmworth, the contractor, turns over his thirty thousand a year, and does it easy too; and Bentham—that's Bentham Brothers, big Colonial merchants, they have each of them fifteen or twenty thousand a year. And their

houses are big palatial buildings. They call them the Bentham princes; they are so fine and stocky.'

Pansy looked at him in languid surprise as the unaccustomed word struck on her ear, but Gurth was too full of his subject to heed her.

'Brabazon Street is all very well when a chap has made his little pile,' he went on, 'and wants to take his ease, and enjoy himself; but for a man who has to do his day's work, there is nothing to beat Broadley Street. There is plenty of life and traffic to keep one from feeling dull, and yet there's quiet, too.'

'And it is a pleasant house,' observed Valerie, feeling that a remark was needed at this point.

'It is one of the best-built houses I know,' was the enthusiastic answer. 'The rooms are well proportioned and nicely finished. And as to the furniture,' here Gurth paused as though some secret doubt assailed him. 'Well, I was obliged to let Mollie have her way with the drawing-room; and, to my thinking, she has got things a bit too smart; but we can change all that —ah yes, we can change all that. Mollie is a good old sort. She is never offended or quarrels with folk if they don't take kindly to her ideas.'

'I am sure I should like your sister, Mr. Fordham,' remarked Valerie, with her usual tact. 'She seems so large-minded, and so thoroughly kind-hearted.'

'Oh, she is all that, Mrs. Thurston,' returned Gurth proudly. 'There are few women in Melbourne, or even in the British Isles, to beat Sister Mollie. She has made a rare good wife to Dunbar; and as for the kids, they may bless their stars they have got such a mother. Why, even Tina—little monkey as she is—has been heard to say, "I am glad my mother is so much nicer than other people's mothers, and that I can love her

hard." My word, Mrs. Thurston, there are mothers and mothers ; but I tell you this, our Moll isn't the common or garden sort,' and Gurth chuckled with amusement at his own wit.

But the next minute the old subject got possession of him again.

'I think the dining-room will please you, Pansy. I have furnished it with light oak and green morocco. I picked up the whole suite at Wardroper's sale. He belonged to one of the best families in Melbourne, and had a big house in Brabazon Street ; but his wife died before him, and he left no chick or child ; so, after his death, they just sold everything. I paid quite a pretty figure for the oak suite, but Harry declared it was worth it.'

'You always said you would like to have a dining-room furnished in light oak—did you not, Pansy?' observed Valerie ; but before the girl could rouse herself sufficiently to answer, Gurth dashed cheerfully into the conversation again.

'Well, that is lucky,' he ejaculated, 'to think that I have really hit it off in that way. Mollie was for dark oak and red morocco, but I am glad now that I did not give in to her. And there's another thing,' and here Gurth's voice grew mysterious, 'I meant it to be a surprise, but I never was a good hand at keeping a secret—

'There's a room at the back that looks over a plot of garden ground, and that's the pleasantest room in the house to my thinking, and I call it the "bird's nest," because I am fitting it up for a certain little bird I know, where she can rest after the long voyage.'

Pansy shivered involuntarily, then she broke into a little tinkling laugh.

'"The bird's nest," what a pretty name, Gurth.'

'I christened it myself,' he returned with pardonable vanity, 'when I saw what a snug, home-like little place it was. I would not let even Mollie have a hand in choosing the furniture. There is a couch you could not beat for softness, and two easy chairs that might be lined with down, they are so comfortable. And there is a Sheraton cabinet, with books and china, like the one in your old drawing-room,—I took stock of that,—and a flower table. You told me once, dear,' dropping his voice, 'that if you were as poor as those old women in the almshouses we were visiting, you would have your posy all the same, if it were only daisies and buttercups.'

'And you even remembered that?'

'I think I have never forgotten one of your words,' returned Gurth simply, 'but that speech about the posy stuck to me. I mean to keep that flower table filled; and, when I can afford it, I will build a conservatory. You shall have everything that I can give you,' and then he got up reluctantly, for it was growing late, and took his leave.

This time it was Pansy who went with him to the door, but in a few minutes she returned and bade Valerie good-night.

'I cannot stay,' she said hurriedly, as Valerie looked at her a little wistfully. 'I am so deadly tired of my masquerading. I have been wearing a mask all day, Marmee, but Gurth did not know it. Shall I have to wear it all the rest of my life, I wonder?' Then Valerie took hold of her with gentle force and looked full in her eyes.

'You poor child, no. I have too much faith in Gurth Fordham to believe that. If you will only be

patient with yourself and him, if you will only try to meet him on his own ground and to learn a little—oh, ever so little—of his language, you would understand him better. Nay, I am not sure that you would not grow to love him.'

'Are you mad or dreaming, Marmee?'

'Neither, dearest. I am merely evolving a true statement from my inner consciousness. How could I sit by and listen unmoved to all Gurth said to-night? It touched me to the heart, Pansy; it did, indeed,' but there was no answering gleam in the moody blue eyes.

'Think how he has planned, and saved, and worked,' went on Valerie, 'and how little encouragement he has had. Letters, oh yes! but how few men would have contented themselves with letters for all those years. How he has hungered and thirsted for a sight of your face, for the sound of your voice; of the bitter disappointment which he bore so patiently and uncomplainingly when the nest was ready and the bird refused to fly to it.'

'Don't, Marmee,' in a shrill, hard voice. 'Do you think I don't know that—that I am so hard-hearted that I do not feel too; all the time he talked I was holding myself in. "Why have you spent all that money for a mean little coward who has told you nothing but lies?" That is what I wanted to say to him, Marmee. Why am I made like this? I want to love Gurth. I am trying with all my heart to love him,' putting her hands to her breast with a gesture of despair, 'but I feel like a stone,' and after this she refused to say another word.

Valerie was sad at heart as she went to her room. Pansy was simply impossible. How was she to reach

her? A sense of her own responsibility weighed heavily upon her. With all her love she seemed powerless to help her. Pansy was determined to fulfil her bond. She would neither free herself, or suffer others to free her, and she must just stand by and do nothing.

But there were other difficulties to be surmounted. If this marriage were really to take place in five weeks' time, it was necessary for her to take counsel with Pansy. Even a modest outfit would require some degree of thought and preparation.

Valerie had realised two hundred pounds by the sale of the furniture and her husband's books, and she determined that the greater part of this should be laid out for Pansy. She must be properly equipped for the voyage, and though there should be no unnecessary extravagance, Pansy ought to appear at the best advantage when she was introduced to her husband's relations.

Valerie had plenty of time for reflection on all these knotty points, for Pansy positively refused to enter on the subject day after day, and it was not until their last evening at Eardley arrived that Valerie found her opportunity.

Gurth had gone to London for a few hours on business, and would return too late to see them again that night.

He was going down to Wycombe with them the next day, and intended taking up his quarters at the Crown Hotel until his marriage. 'I don't mean to let you out of my sight for many hours,' he had said to Pansy. 'I shall be there if you want me, ready to tramp in your service from morning until night.' And another time he had said to Valerie: 'If you and Pansy would like to have a few days in London for

shopping or seeing sights, I'm your man, Mrs. Thurston. Only say the word, and I will telegraph for rooms at the "Metropole" or the "Langham,"' and he seemed quite disappointed when Valerie told him that she would not be able to leave Philippa, and that they would probably do their shopping at Wycombe.

They had gone down as usual to the beach, and had wandered under the cliff for some distance; but when Philippa had gone off to join some little companions, they seated themselves on the shingle, and Valerie burst into her subject without the least preamble.

'Pansy dear, I am so glad to have you to myself this evening. When Gurth is with us I never get an opportunity of saying a word to you, and there is so much to settle.'

'Is there, Marmee?' and Pansy scooped a little hole in the sand with the point of her sunshade. It was evidently an engrossing occupation, for she carried it on during the greater part of their conversation, much to Valerie's secret annoyance.

'Dear child, how can you ask such a question?' she returned reproachfully. 'Do you know we have little more than a month before us?' No answer, only a vicious dig in the sand, greatly to the dismay of an infant crab taking his evening walk abroad.

'I have made up my mind that we must get your things at Anderson's,' continued Valerie; 'they are dear, but one can always rely on them, and their dressmaker is certainly the best we can find in Wycombe. All your prettiest frocks have been made there.'

'Yes, I know, Marmee; but we were not paupers then.'

'Neither are we paupers now,' and Valerie spoke in a cheery manner. 'There will be no difficulty in procuring money for your outfit. We have two hundred pounds in the bank.'

Then Pansy flashed an indignant look at her. 'Marmee, do you imagine for a moment that I shall consent to touch that?'

'Of course you will use it,' returned Valerie calmly. 'We have things in common, you and I. Are you not going to halve your income with me, you foolish, illogical child? and do you suppose I shall begrudge a few pounds from my little store to my husband's daughter. Pansy, it would be a disgrace to me and to his memory if you leave my roof like a beggar. I have given you your own way in most things, but I will not let you have it in this,' and there was a trace of displeasure in Valerie's quiet voice.

'Oh, if you are going to put your foot down, Marmee, and make things unpleasant for me,' grumbled Pansy.

Then her step-mother smiled. 'There will be no unpleasantness if you will only be guided by me. There shall be no extravagance; I will promise you that, but there must be a sufficient outfit.'

'And you will let me be married in my travelling dress at eight o'clock in the morning?' asked Pansy, who had already argued these points with her lover, and extorted a reluctant consent from him. 'I made sure you would wear a white gown,' he had said wistfully; 'but then, what does it matter, darling? My wife can have as many white frocks as she likes.' And even Valerie had no objection to offer.

'I have always felt very strongly on this point,' she returned slowly. 'In my opinion the white dress is a

beautiful symbol of bridal purity, and under other circumstances I should be loath to dispense with it; but perhaps, considering all things, it will be as well to wear an ordinary walking dress.'

'There, I knew you would be sensible, Marmee; and no one must know the day except the Dean and Mrs. Walcott. The Dean has always promised to give me away.'

'I must write and tell them, then,' returned Valerie, 'for they meant to stay at Braemar another month. This will interfere with their plans, I fear.'

'Oh, I could not be married properly without the Dean!' exclaimed Pansy with a shade of her old flippant manner; 'it would not be legal. I shall write and tell him so.' And then she began to laugh hysterically. 'Marmee, it is so funny, but Gurth does not know a creature whom he can ask to be his best man. He was talking about it yesterday. He says he is going to run a certain fellow to earth who came over from Melbourne with him. His name is Redfern, and he lives somewhere in London. To quote Gurth's words, "He is a decent little chap, and we chummed together, and if I can only find his diggings." He talked about a married sister at Lewisham, but I have clean forgot her name. Lucid, was it not, Marmee?'

'We might introduce him to Frank Allerton,' returned Valerie. 'Frank is such a nice boy, Pansy; and he is so good-natured that he would do a good turn for anybody. When we get back to Roadside I could ask him and Ella to tea, and then Gurth could meet them,' and as Pansy evidently approved of this plan, it was agreed that in the event of the mysterious Redfern not turning up that Frank Allerton should be

asked to stand by Gurth. He was a young mining engineer at present staying with his family. His father was the Vicar of St. Stephen's, and they were old friends of Valerie's.

After this they settled down comfortably to a regular business discussion, which lasted until Philippa's bedtime arrived. Pansy proved tolerably docile. At her step-mother's suggestion she consented to lay aside her mourning and to choose the colours that Gurth most affected.

'At least I can do that for him,' she said in a tone of sad humility.

It was a relief to Valerie when the conversation was over. Pansy and she understood each other, and the rest was plain sailing.

The return to Roadside after their spacious apartments at Eardley would be a trial to them both, and even Phil grumbled a good deal at leaving the dear seaside.

'I never, never had such a lovely time in my life!' she exclaimed ecstatically that last night; 'it was just delicious having you all to myself, Marmee.' And though Valerie could hardly endorse this, she felt thankful for those months of peaceful rest, which had braced her nerves and made her more fit to bear fresh trials.

'Now for the Roadside Caravan,' observed Pansy as the train moved off. 'You have seen the family mansion, Gurth, so you can judge if my name suits it.'

'Well, it isn't much of a place,' he returned. 'I think we can do better for you in Broadley Street. By the bye, Pansy,' leaning towards her eagerly, 'in spite of your laughing at me, I've unearthed my fox.'

'Oh, you have found your friend Redfern.' But

Pansy's manner was slightly indifferent, and she was frowning at a lovely little sunshade in her hand, which was dainty enough for the Queen of all the fairies, and which Gurth had brought from town with him as an offering to his lady-love.

'Yes, I have found the old chap,' returned Gurth, rubbing his hands with an air of enjoyment. 'I felt as cute as a Yankee when I did the job. I remembered that his brother-in-law's name was Pierson, so I made tracks for Lewisham, and hunted him up at the post office, and there he was, as large as life and as jolly as ever.'

'And you asked him to be your best man?' observed Pansy, in a tone that would have chilled most men.

'Yes, dear, and he seemed as pleased as possible. He will come down to the "Crown" a day or two before the wedding and put me through my paces. He is really a smart little chap. He is in the Civil Service, and his father was General Redfern. His people used to live at Wycombe, he told me, and they knew the Canon and Lady Emma. You should have seen his face when I told him I was going to marry their daughter.'

'I have heard father speak of the Redferns,' returned Pansy in a low voice. 'Is his name Ralph?' and as Gurth answered in the affirmative, 'they are friends of the Hammonds, and she told me that one of the sons, Ralph, had gone out to Australia for his health.'

'It is this fellow. Didn't I tell you, Pansy, that he was a decent sort of chap?' and Gurth was so innocently pleased with himself, so satisfied that he had made a hit, that Pansy kept her feelings to herself.

'I used to meet this Ralph at the Hammonds when I was in my teens,' she said afterwards to Valerie. 'He

paid me a lot of attention, but I never liked him. He is very clever and quizzical, not a bit what Gurth believes him to be. I would much rather have had that nice boy, Frank Allerton ; but there, what does it matter ? what does anything matter ?' concluded Pansy, with a weary sigh.

CHAPTER XXXI

'YOU WILL NEVER BE OLD, MARMEE'

'What would I give for a heart of flesh to warm me through,
Instead of this heart of stone, ice-cold, whatever I do;
Hard and cold and small, of all hearts the worst of all?'
CHRISTINA ROSSETTI.

LATE that evening, after Valerie had finished her unpacking and put tired Phil to bed, she went out into the garden. To her surprise she found Pansy alone.

'Gurth has gone down to the "Crown,"' observed the girl. 'I am afraid I gave him a strong hint, Marmee. I said we were tired, and that I had all my unpacking to do, and then he went off like a lamb.'

'I have finished mine and Phil's,' returned Valerie. 'Shall I come upstairs and help you?' but Pansy scouted this idea indignantly.

'As though you are not far more tired than I am. Sit down, Marmee. I don't mean to touch a thing until I go to bed; really, the verandah looks quite nice with all these creepers and trailing plants; it is not such a bad little place after all. The "summer parlour," as Gurth calls it, is the best room in the house.'

'Yes, and those flower borders are quite beautiful,' observed Valerie, who had been much impressed with

the appearance of the little garden. The Deanery gardener had taken it under his supervision, and from time to time his assistant came down to Roadside for an hour or two's work ; it was one of her friend's many kindnesses, and as Valerie glanced round her small but blooming domain, every flower seemed like a loving message from kind hearts.

The narrow slip of lawn was as smooth and soft as velvet and every unsightly weed removed, and the long borders were masses of brilliant bloom ; as Pansy remarked, 'They looked for all the world like a cottage garden that was competing for the village prize.'

But the effect was beautiful ; there were dahlias and gladioli, cream and salmon begonias, yellow sun-flowers, various coloured zinnias and African marigolds, with here and there the pale pink flower of the Japanese anemone ; and close to the bowery verandah there were the milky white blooms of the nicotiana, filling the summer air with its delicious fragance.

'I always said the garden had capabilities,' remarked Valerie with a little triumph in her voice. 'Cooper has certainly done wonders ; he has utilised every inch of space, and yet there is no overcrowding. We are going to plant standard rose-trees down one side of the lawn, Pansy ; the Dean promised me the trees months ago. Dear things, they are far too good to me.'

'Of course they are good to you ; who could help it?' returned Pansy affectionately. 'How I wish you could have a nice garden, Marmee. Oh, how I hate to think of leaving you in this horrid little caravan.'

'Why, Pansy dear, what nonsense,' for there were tears in the girl's voice ; 'if you knew how thankful I am even for this humble roof. Do you know I have

such curious thoughts sometimes about my future.' I see myself an old woman pacing up and down those paths smelling my roses, and cutting off the dead leaves in quite the orthodox elderly fashion.'

'It is you who are ridiculous now,' replied Pansy. 'I don't believe in your second sight at all. Fate never intended you to ornament a caravan for life, and then you will never be old, Marmee.'

'My dear Pansy, are you trying to impress on my mind that Fate, as you call it, has destined me for an early grave?'

'No,' rather gruffly, 'I was not thinking of anything so gruesome. I mean, however old you are you will never quite outlive youth; there is something springy, and fresh, and young about you in spite of your grave looks, and you won't be wrinkled, or faded, or prim, as some old ladies are. Look at old Mrs. Venables. She is so crotchety and touchy that one is frightened to say a word to her for fear it should act like a lighted match, and cause a general combustion.'

'Oh, I think I can promise that I shall never take Mrs. Venables as my pattern.'

'Well, she is a cross old thing, and the less we say of her the better. When we sing about the noble army of martyrs I often think poor Mr. Venables must have been numbered with them. What a life she did lead that poor man, "her dear Simon," as she called him.'

'Well, I don't know, Pansy,' returned Valerie, who liked to be fair to other people even in an argument. 'In her way she did her duty to him, and a man must be tolerably weak who submits to petticoat government and allows himself to be henpecked; she was the grey mare—the stronger of the two,' that is all.'

'Indeed!' with an accent of scorn. 'I thought

Dame Venables was your pet aversion, Marmee; but I suppose you have changed your opinion. Mine is as fixed as a rock. I have canonised the "dear departed" —does she not always call him the dear departed? —as "Simon the Martyr," and martyr he certainly was.'

'And you do not fear that I shall be a dried-up, testy old lady like Mrs. Venables?' observed Valerie, who felt a certain morbid fascination in discussing her future.

'No,' returned Pansy, 'your figure will always be trim and pretty.' Oh, I can see you, Marmee—I can see you quite plainly. Your hair will be grey—that nice soft silver-grey that is so becoming; and perhaps your face will be a little thin and lined; but your eyes will be as sweet as ever, and your voice too, and you will be just as dear and lovely as you are now, even if I am not here to see you.' And then Pansy's voice broke a little, and even Valerie's was not quite clear.

'Little flatterer,' she returned, trying to smile. 'Do you think I can swallow all that without suffering moral indigestion?' but the little compliment soothed and pleased her, and she thought of it afterwards when Pansy had gone indoors to set about her unpacking, and she was pacing the narrow path where the standard rose-trees were not yet planted. Phebe was in her kitchen singing blithely as she bustled about among her pots and pans. 'Oh dear, what can the matter be,' she was chanting lustily, 'Johnnie's not home from the fair.'

'She is thinking of Jem the carrier,' remarked Valerie to herself. 'Well, she might do worse for herself than take an honest, strapping fellow who does his day's work squarely, and knows how to treat a woman.'

The path was so narrow that the white blossoms of

the nicotiana brushed against her black dress as she passed, and the honey-sweet perfume of their breath came to her like a caress. A tangle of tea-roses, jasmine, and honeysuckle hung over her head from the verandah. As she stood for a moment to enjoy their sweetness she leant her cheek against the cool leaves. 'Nature never disappoints us,' she said to herself. 'I was dreading to see this place again. I would not say so to Pansy; it would only have troubled her; but I felt as though I hated the very thought of it, and yet there was all this beauty and sweetness waiting for me on the other side.' And then Valerie broke off a spray of jasmine and placed it tenderly in her bosom, for she loved these little starry flowers which always reminded her of her childhood's home. 'Beauty on the other side,' she said to herself. 'Well, and what if it be so?' and as she walked down the path again in the semi-darkness of the August night a vague thought seemed working within her of what that welcome home must be when the tired life-pilgrim has struggled through deep waters to that other shore, and he opens his dim eyes on the first fair flowers of Paradise. 'After all,' she thought, 'there is plenty of comfort if only one digs deep enough. Most people skim over the surface of things with bird-like movements, picking up stray crumbs here and there; but one wants something more satisfying when the wintry days come.'

During the next week or two the ladies of Roadside were busily engaged in shopping, and Gurth complained bitterly that he scarcely saw Pansy until evening, and then she was almost too tired to talk to him, for the weather was still sultry, and the long unshaded walk to High Street tired them after the pleasant sea breezes.

At first Gurth spent his time loafing about the town in the hope of seeing his lady-love, going from one shop to another, and inducing her and Valerie to partake of a luxurious luncheon at the pastry-cook's; but after a day or two Valerie was obliged to put a stop to these little entertainments.

Ices and fruits and confectionery were enticing in their way, but they impeded business and encouraged desultoriness; they must hurry through their work and get back to Phil, who had to spend long solitary mornings. When Valerie put her foot down, as Pansy expressed it, people were generally obliged to submit to her will, so Gurth got into the habit of taking an early train up to town, and coming back late in the afternoon, and he seldom returned empty-handed. Poor Gurth, his gifts were not always graciously received. The magnificently fitted bag that was to be his wedding present to his bride had already arrived at the 'Crown,' but Pansy had refused to look at it.

'It is too early; you must not bring it to me yet,' she said in quite a distressed tone. 'You ought never to have bought it, Gurth. I did so beg you not to spend your money on me.'

'Why should I not spend it on you, darling?' returned Gurth, who was wholly bewildered by this strange caprice of his sweetheart. 'Am I not going to endow you with all my worldly goods? And what's the odds if I buy a few things beforehand just to please my blue-eyed princess?' and Gurth took her in his arms and kissed the brown head; then he raised the drooping face and looked at it tenderly.

'What ails you, dear? Why should a trifle like that come between you and me, who are soon to be man and wife? Don't you know, my shy bird, that I love to

give you things—that I would strew your path with roses and diamonds if I could.' Then Pansy gave a sad little flickering laugh.

'Yes, I know, Gurth, and you are so kind and generous,' and she would have freed herself, but he would not let her move.

'No, I shall not let you go until you answer me fairly,' and there was a quiet determination in Gurth's manner that rather impressed Pansy; more than once she had seen a trace of a strong will held in check. 'If Gurth were ever to take the wrong bit in his mouth it would be hard to turn him,' she once said to her step-mother, and Valerie had fully agreed; it was this reserve of manly strength that had just won the latter's respect, and which inspired her with hope that with time and patience Pansy's heart might be won.

'How am I to answer fairly when I am cooped up like a duck in a hen-coop?' she returned pettishly; then Gurth laughed and put her away from him at arm's length.

'Well, you have plenty of space now,' he returned, 'and I can see you better, so look me in the face, little Eyebright, and tell me the truth like a Britisher; why do you object to my giving you presents, when the poorest lad will save a few pence to buy his lass fairings?'

'Oh, I don't know,' returned Pansy hurriedly; 'one cannot always have reasons for things. I don't like the idea of you wasting your money on me; I am not worth it, Gurth,' and here, to his dismay, the blue eyes were full of tears; 'it frightens me somehow to see how you think of me, and how little I shall fulfil your expectations,' and there was such a pained expression on the girl's face that Gurth involuntarily loosed his

hold. 'I know too well, oh! far too well, how I shall disappoint you.'

'You will do nothing of the kind,' returned Gurth almost angrily; 'disappoint me, don't I know that I shall have the dearest and sweetest little wife in the world, and that she will be the blessing of my life.' But Gurth's lover-like speech was checked as he saw Pansy cover her face with her hand, while slow tears trickled through her fingers. 'Don't,' she sobbed, 'don't; you are making things so much worse for me, and I want to be good and do my duty if I can.' Duty! no wonder Gurth looked blankly at her, for in spite of his devotion, the word chilled him; when he was pouring out his heart's love, why should she talk to him of duty.

'It is a poor word to use between you and me,' he said slowly. Then Pansy realised her mistake, and dried her eyes.

'Oh, how foolish I am,' she exclaimed, 'just because I am tired, I am behaving like a wayward child, and trying your patience. I am not really ungrateful, Gurth. I am not such a little fiend as all that. Let me see, the 30th is to be our wedding-day'—Pansy said this without perceptibly wincing,—'you may bring the beautiful bag to me on the 27th, that is nearly three weeks hence.'

'Ay, the time goes slowly,' replied Gurth with rather a heavy sigh; 'but you have reckoned wrongly, darling, and it is only a fortnight and two days to the 27th. I wish I had some notion of killing the time. There's Redfern wants me to give him a day or two—he has got a sort of summer shanty with two other chaps at Cookham-on-the-Thames—he is a great oar; but there, I would sooner be at the "Crown," and near my little girl, even though I don't see much of her.'

'Oh, Gurth, it would be so much better for you than staying here,' observed Pansy eagerly; 'indeed it is not my fault that I see so little of you, for there is so much to be done and no time to do it in. Marmee will tell you so herself. It troubles me to see you so dull and wanting me, and yet how am I to help it? I think,' she continued gently, 'it would be easier for all of us—for you, and me, and Marmee too,—if you were to go to Cookham for a few days. Why don't you talk to Marmee, and see what she thinks.' And though Gurth was plainly averse to the notion, he consented at last to act on this advice.

He was rather disconcerted to find that Mrs. Thurston sided with her step-daughter.

'I think Pansy is reasonable in this, Gurth,' she returned, for he had begged her to call him by his Christian name; 'it is quite true, as she says, that we ought to be busy from morning to night; she can hardly spare these evenings to you, and when she has letters to write, she often sits up late to do them, and this tires her for the next day's work.'

'I see what you mean,' he answered reluctantly. 'Well, if Pansy had only understood my letter properly she would have been ready for me, and we might have been married by now; but there, it is no use crying over spilt milk. I suppose I had better make tracks for a day or two, for I am pretty well tired of kicking up my heels in High Street, and staring into shop windows. Let me see, to-day 's Saturday. I will wire to Redfern, and tell him I will run down to Cookham on Tuesday, and perhaps I will make shift to stay until Saturday.'

'You would not remain over Sunday'—tentatively, —then Gurth stared at her in a reproachful manner.

'Why, of course not,' he ejaculated; 'don't I get

Pansy comfortably to myself for hours on Sunday. It is not only walking alongside of her to the Cathedral morning and afternoon, and saying our prayers and singing our psalms together; but there is the evening, and she is a bit rested, and we can have our talk. No, you will not get me away from Wycombe on Sunday,' concluded Gurth, with decision on every line of his face, and then Valerie said no more.

'We must be content with small mercies,' she observed to Pansy, 'and he is a good fellow to give way to us at all. We can get through a good deal in four days, Pansy. You can have your dresses fitted, and we will set about the marking, and consider what we are to do with the Walcott present'—for a handsome cheque had come from the Dean and Mrs. Walcott, which was to be laid out for Pansy's benefit.

The arrival of the cheque had given Valerie *un mauvais quart d'heure.* Pansy at first wanted to send it back.

'It is too much, Marmee,' she kept saying. 'I ought not to take it. I am no relation of theirs, and their generosity makes me quite uncomfortable.'

'They are dear friends, and they can afford to be as generous as they like, and I will not have them hurt, Pansy.' But though Pansy was induced to keep the cheque, and to write a very pretty letter of thanks, she was hardly to be persuaded to spend it.

Valerie was very patient with her, and at last it was decided that they should go up to town with Gurth on Tuesday, and lay it out at the Stores.

There were various things that Pansy still needed,—another travelling box, and writing-case, and a mackintosh, and a sealskin jacket—the Dean's munificent gift would cover all this.

'The Dean wanted to send more, but I would not let him,' Mrs. Walcott wrote. 'I knew what a proud touchy little person you are, Pansy, but now you must please your old friends by buying some pretty and useful articles with it. You will be amused to know that the Dean suggested a sealskin jacket as usual—he always does, you know; it is his one idea of a trousseau. By the bye, I have never given you his message.

'"Tell Pansy she is perfectly right; her marriage would not be legal unless I gave her away, so I'll take care to be back by the 28th, and I shall be in plenty of time,"—those were his very words, dear.'

CHAPTER XXXII

A BLUE-EYED PRINCESS

'Love unreturn'd
Hath gracious uses; the keen pang departs,
The sweetness never. Sorrow's touch doth ope
A mingled fount of sweet and bitter tears
No summer heat can dry, no winter's cold
Lock up in ice. When music grieves, the past
Returns in tears.'—SMITH.

GURTH'S self-sacrifice brought its own reward. On the evening before he was to start for Cookham, Pansy showed herself so sweet and winning that he was almost dumb with delight.

She even took unusual pains with her dress, and her black barège was enlivened by a breast-knot of rosebuds and jasmine. The smoothly coiled hair looked bright and burnished in the sunshine, and there was a softer look in the sea-blue eyes. It was touching to see Gurth's gratitude for these small favours. 'You seem fonder of me to-night, darling,' he said in a wondering tone as they paced the little lawn together. 'It seems as though I have got my blue-eyed Princess back. It is worth going away to have an evening like this'; then Pansy slipped her hand through his arm. It was her first voluntary attempt at a caress,

and the touch of those slight finger-tips on his coat sleeve thrilled Gurth through and through.

'You see I am pleased with you, sir,' she said, actually smiling in his face; 'you are going away because Marmee and I want a few days to ourselves, and it is splendid, and self-denying of you, and we are ever so grateful.'

'Now that sounds odd to me,' he returned, laying his big hand over her small one, and trying to adapt his heavy step to hers. 'I suppose women are different from men, but it seems to me that if I were steeped in business up to my very eyes, I should never be willing to part with you, no not for a single day, let alone four days.'

'Of course we are different, you foolish fellow.' But as Pansy spoke she had a curious inexplicable feeling as though scales were falling from her eyes and she would soon be able to see clearly. 'We women are more practical, and we do not overlook little things in the way you magnificent masculine creatures do. We know we cannot do our work properly if there is some one always round the corner trying to distract our attention; but no, that idea would never enter your head.'

'No, it would not, you are right there,' he answered slowly; 'it seems a bit strange to me, don't you know, that a girl can't take an honest man for better or worse without ordering a dozen or so of smart frocks. If I had had my way, you would have put on a white gown and taken my arm and walked with me to the Cathedral early one morning, and any finery you had wanted we would have bought together in the London shops, and paid for with your husband's money,—that would have been the plan to please me, and I would

have been a proud and happy man, dear, if you had only given in to me in this.'

'Don't Gurth, please; do not spoil this lovely evening by saying such things,' pleaded Pansy. But she spoke with unusual gentleness; it seemed to her as though, until this moment, she had never so fully realised the depth and unselfishness of this man's love.

It is a fearful responsibility for a woman when she first recognises that a human soul is dependent on her for comfort, when across the vast chasm she sees hands stretching out to her and seeking to grasp hers, and knows that her heart has no welcome for him. The poor pilgrim of love must pass the inhospitable dwelling. In happy homes he may see the light of household fires burn warm and bright, but for him there are only the stony peaks and snow-covered wastes.

Pansy's nature was a complex one; she was full of contradictions. Her affections were deep and enduring. When she really loved, it would be for once and all. No faults, no weaknesses, no amount of imperfection would repel her. She would cling with the tenacity of the limpet to her chosen rock. But half measures—a half-hearted attachment—was impossible to her, and though an overstrained notion of honour and generosity had kept her bound all these years, the first sight of her affianced husband seemed to have turned her to stone. Underneath were strange warring elements of discord—magnetic attraction and repulsion, callous insensibility and fluctuations of throbbing and hurrying pulsation. A critical and exacting nature perpetually exasperated; and thwarted gentler instincts pleading for patience and fair play. No wonder Pansy was bewildered and irritated by her own contradictions; if

she could not understand herself how could others comprehend her?

'Marmee is nearest to me,' she would say to herself in those weary days, 'but I doubt if she ever really understands,—if she did she would not be always praising Gurth to me and saying nice little things about him, as though I cannot see the fingerposts of his virtues pointing down the cross-roads in the most aggressive manner—this way to happiness and Melbourne, and so on. Oh dear, if I were only as free as the birds of the air and could choose my own mate; but what did a silly child, not seventeen, know about men?'

But on this September evening some calming esoteric influence seemed to tranquillise and soothe the girl's unnatural irritability; and the soft twitter of birds and the breath of honeysuckle and roses harmonised with her softened feelings, and made her content to stroll up and down the lawn with her hand on Gurth's arm; it even pleased her in a vague way to feel how strong it was.

'He is like a navvy,' she said to herself; 'it is a good name, and it suits him. I am glad there is nothing little about him. A man ought to be big and strong if he is not clever'; and then there came before her a sudden vivid remembrance of Marmaduke Nugent, with his clear-cut intelligent face, and the free manly grace of his step and carriage. 'He is a scholar and a finished gentleman,' she went on, 'he and my navvy are the Antipodes'; and this unwelcome thought chilled her in the oddest way, and the next moment she dropped Gurth's arm. 'Are you tired, darling?' he asked, alert in an instant.

'No, not tired exactly,' she returned a little frac-

tiously, 'but only a polar bear can keep up this sort of thing for more than an hour on end. Shall we go and sit down in the verandah until supper-time. I expect Marmee will join us directly.'

'Ay, to be sure we will; that's a good thought, dear. I was a selfish beggar to let your pretty little feet tramp, tramp, alongside of me till they were ready to drop off. I am not fit to be trusted with the care of my little girl, though I love her better every day.' And then, as they stood together in the dim verandah, underneath the festoons of honeysuckles and jasmine, he laid his hand on her arm: 'Little Eyebright,' he said tenderly, 'I am going to leave you to-morrow for four whole days, and I have been with you for more than three weeks, and you have never given me one kiss, though I have begged for one over and over again.'

'You have had plenty, Gurth,' and Pansy's face was flaming.

'Ay, but I had to take them as best I could, and I can't call to mind that you ever kissed me back; you have been that shy with me, darling, that I have held myself in for fear of scaring you; and yet in less than three weeks we are to be married.'

Pansy was silent, but she did not move away, the appealing tenderness of Gurth's voice seemed to pierce to her heart; how patient he had been with her. A quick impulse of gratitude overcame her shy reluctance.

'I will kiss you now,' she said simply, and putting her hands on his shoulders, she laid a light butterfly kiss on his lips. But before he could recover from his surprise, for he was fairly dazed with joy, she had rushed away and hidden herself. But five minutes

later she was pacing up and down her little room, like a caged panther, and storming at herself for her weakness. 'What made me do it?' she asked herself indignantly; 'what has come over me this evening? Oh! I am glad, glad, that he is going away; I never want to see him again.'

Then her cheeks grew hot. 'It was a Judas kiss,' she went on; 'I am growing such an accomplished hypocrite, that I hardly know when my mask is on or not; if I did not know better, I could almost have fancied that I liked him to-night. Why did I take his arm, I wonder? why, why, why am I such a miserable little sinner, and he a very saint of a navvy?' and then she wept a few angry tears, until pride dried them; but when Valerie came up in some anxiety to summon her to supper, she found her quite grave and composed. 'Is it really supper-time?' she said quite naturally, 'and I have not mixed the salad. 'Go down, Marmee, and I will be with you in a minute'; and all through the meal she talked as cheerfully as possible, but she never once looked at Gurth, and she would not be alone with him for an instant. But later, as she lay awake in the soft glimmering dusk of a summer night, Valerie's words recurred to her. 'If you will only be patient with yourself and him, if you will only try to meet him on his own ground, and to learn a little—oh, ever so little—of his language, you would understand him better, nay, I am not sure that you would not grow to love him.'

She repeated the words again and again, until the ceaseless iteration wearied her. Why had she remembered them; there was no truth, no possible truth in them; no amount of patience on Gurth's part could win her heart. When two people are on different planes, how are they to meet and understand each other, she

thought drearily. 'Oh, I will do my duty to Gurth; I will be a good wife to him, although I can never love him as I ought.'

They were to go up to town by an early train the next morning, and Philippa was to accompany them, as Valerie did not like leaving her all day with Phebe. Phil was in high glee all breakfast-time at the idea of the promised treat, and to add to her satisfaction, she received a letter from her father.

'He is really coming home on Monday or Tuesday,' she exclaimed, looking up with sparkling eyes. 'He says he is tired of Norway, and wants to be back at the old house. Dear father! how I do long to see him again,' and Phil kissed her letter in a perfect ecstasy.

'Ronald will be home too before the end of the week,' observed Valerie, who had been absorbed with her boy's scrawl; 'he does not seem tired of Scarborough, but of course he must be back at Mr. Carfax's by the 20th. Really Phil, our heads will be quite turned with all this excitement—Mr. Nugent, Ronald, and a wedding.'

'And my doll's perambulator, Marmee,' corrected Phil; 'you must not forget I am going to buy that at the Stores with father's money.'

'Oh we have not forgotten, have we Pansy?' remarked Valerie sympathetically. 'I think that must be our first purchase, and then our minds will be free for the travelling box and sealskin. Come Phil, finish your breakfast, or Gurth will be here.'

Under other circumstances Valerie would have enjoyed her day—she was fond of shopping, and liked buying pretty things, and Gurth proved himself an excellent escort.

They partook of an excellent luncheon, and then

Gurth took them into the haberdashery department to choose some gloves and handkerchiefs and embroideries for his sister; then he bought presents for each of the children; and by that time it was time to have a cup of tea and hurry off to the train.

It was nearly six o'clock when they reached the station, and they had not a moment to lose. As they took their places, Gurth gripped Pansy's hand tightly. 'You may look out for me on Saturday evening at the usual time,' he said; 'I will not fail you.' And then the guard came up and told him to stand back. 'We nearly lost our train,' Pansy remarked, glancing back at him with a smile as they moved away from the station. 'Poor Gurth, he looks quite hot.'

'I do think Mr. Fordham such a nice man,' observed Phil in a serious voice. Her lap was full of parcels with which he had loaded her—chocolate, bon-bons, cakes, and fruit; but beside Pansy there was only a basket of roses. 'He is not as handsome as father—of course no one is,—but I do admire him so, he is so nice and brown, and has such kind eyes,'—then Pansy gave Phil one of her prettiest smiles, but the day's shopping had evidently wearied her, and for the greater part of the journey she lay back with closed eyes, as though half asleep. Valerie looked at her a little sadly, the small face had grown thinner and paler during the last month; it was an older Pansy whose brown head rested against the cushion. 'All this worry has just worn her out,' thought Valerie pitifully; 'she has been feeding on herself, and brooding over her own unhappiness, until her strength is undermined. I see Gurth notices the change in her; that is why he keeps on saying that the voyage will do her good. 'I wish I could think so,' she went on; 'but I am so afraid when all the excitement is over that

she will break down, and then what will poor Gurth do with her.' But at this point Pansy roused up and complained of the heat. 'If one could only go to sleep,' she grumbled. 'I wish Gurth had let us take the 4.30 train; it was express, and this is a regular crawler. Valerie, who was really the most tired of the party, tried to keep up her flagging spirits. Even when they reached Roadside, her day's work was not over—she had to see Phil safe in bed, and stay beside her until she grew drowsy, then she had to coax Pansy to take her supper, for the girl seemed unwilling to eat; neither would she go to bed. 'I must make the most of the time,' she said feverishly, 'come and sit on the verandah, Marmee,' and we will have a talk. But Valerie misunderstood her.'

'I think we are too tired, dear,' she said gently; 'besides, we have settled all our plans,—we are to go down to Madame Grampierre early to have your dresses fitted, and in the afternoon we are to do the marking.'

'Oh, I was not thinking of my frocks,' returned Pansy in a bored tone, 'we have time enough and to spare for all that. I am not going to work myself to death to get things done in Gurth's absence.'

'But all the same we will do as much as we can,' replied Valerie. But Pansy only shrugged her shoulders rather dubiously.

'I am not so sure of that,' she returned perversely. 'I mean to have one whole holiday, and to spend it as I like. Oh, we will go to Madame Grampierre to-morrow and get that detestable business over; and we will "needlework," as Phil calls it, as much as you like on Thursday; but I will have my innings on Friday as sure as I was christened Pansy,'—a very favourite expression with her.

'My dear child,' returned Valerie, quite amazed at this sudden display of energy.

'Yes, your dear child is going to stick to you like a leech,' remarked Pansy decidedly; 'that is not a pretty illustration, but it serves my purpose. Now look here, Marmee, you know Phil is going to spend the day with the Hammonds—it is Rosamond's birthday, and they are to have a picnic to Wardley, so you and I will just be by ourselves.'

'Yes, I remember. Well, what mischief is your little head brewing?'

'Oh, no mischief at all, only a day's idleness; we will do absolutely nothing from morning to night.'

'My dear Pansy, is that your idea of a happy day?'

'It is my idea of a real holiday; but of course we shall amuse ourselves—we will garden a little, and read aloud, and the word clothes shall not be mentioned between us.'

'Oh, now I begin to see light.'

'It is to be a rest day,' went on Pansy almost solemnly,—'a day we shall remember, you and I, to our lives' end; but I have not finished the programme. We will have an early tea and go into the Castle grounds, and stay there until the moon rises. I have never seen the ruins by moonlight, and Mrs. Walcott says the effect is so fine.'

'And what if there be no moon?'

'Oh, in that case we will flit round the ruins like a couple of bats in the eerie dusk. Now, Marmee, remember I mean to have my way in this. You are not to hurry back for Phil; Phebe is a kind steady girl, and we can trust her.'

'Are you sure of that, Pansy?'—a little anxiously;

'Phil is to be home before nine, and she will be sure to be rather excited and over-tired.'

'Well, we shall be home by half-past nine. I never meant to make a night of it. I really am serious, Marmee. I have set my heart on having you all to myself—it will be your child's last holiday,' finished Pansy, in a tone of exquisite sadness that brought the tears to Valerie's eyes; and then, after a few more words as to Phebe's steadiness and kindness of heart, Valerie reluctantly gave her consent; and after that Pansy went off contentedly to bed.

CHAPTER XXXIII

MERLE CASTLE AND A DREAM

'Strongly it bears us along in swelling and limitless billows,
Nothing before and nothing behind but the sky and the ocean.'
COLERIDGE'S Translation from SCHILLER.

'Like one that on a lonesome road,
Doth walk in fear and dread.'—COLERIDGE.

IT was impossible to throw cold water on Pansy's little project; nevertheless Valerie, who was one of the most conscientious of women, felt secretly uneasy.

Philippa was a sacred charge to her, and until the last week or two, when shopping expeditions entailed long hours away from home, the child had hardly been out of her sight.

Phebe might be a good steady girl, but there was Jem the carrier. Human nature, even in its finest form, is not immaculate; and temptation in the shape of a well-set-up widower, with matrimonial purposes written legibly on every feature of his broad good-natured face, was strong enough to entice any rosy-cheeked little maiden.

'Very likely there would be a parcel, and Phebe would be gossiping with him at the door, and forgetting Phil altogether,' thought Valerie, 'who was at her wit's

end how to steer between these difficulties. Phil had outgrown some of her nocturnal terrors. Mother Peak and Co. had long ago retired to limbo, but she was an excitable child, and after a day's pleasure she always slept restlessly. On these occasions Valerie had always made some excuse to remain in the room—a drawer wanted tidying, or the water was hot and she must wash her brushes. The little ruse always succeeded perfectly, and the sound of her movements generally sent Phil into a refreshing sleep. But now, if she were to lie awake in the moonlight, and Phebe should be at the back door parleying with Jem; Valerie fairly shivered at the thought, and yet how could she disappoint Pansy. She privately resolved to consult Mrs. Hammond. She was a gossiping little person, but extremely kind-hearted, and she at once solved the difficulty.

'My dear Mrs. Thurston,' she said pleasantly, 'you need not worry the least about Philippa. Fraulein shall take her home and stay with her until you and Pansy come back. I shall be glad to do you this trifling favour, and you know Fraulein and Philippa are the best of friends.'

'Oh thank you,' returned Valerie gratefully, 'you have taken a weight off my mind'; but Pansy only laughed most unsympathetically when Valerie told her of this arrangement.

'The hen and her duckling, Marmee,' she observed satirically, and, being in a mischievous mood, she actually drew a little crayon sketch of a fussy hen watching a duckling swimming across a pond. 'Phil and her guardian' was written underneath. The faces of hen and duckling cleverly indicated Valerie's and Phil's peculiar idiosyncrasies. Valerie laughed at the sketch

and praised the artist's skill, and locked it up in her desk, where she came upon it long afterwards. But in spite of Pansy's satire, Valerie knew she would enjoy her expedition all the better for Mrs. Hammond's kind thought.

Fraulein Müller was a fair-haired, round-faced little German, who was the presiding spirit of the Hammond schoolroom, and greatly beloved by her five pupils, who called her their 'liebe Müllerchen.' She was a motherly little person and Phil was much attached to her, and she was exceedingly delighted when she heard Fraulein was to stay with her.

'It will be such fun, Marmee,' she said. 'Müllerchen will knit—knit; she always does, you know, even at lessons, and the clicking will send me to sleep. I used to love to hear Marthe click, but then, you see, the door was always shut,' and here Phil's face clouded and Valerie hastened to change the subject.

Pansy did her duty stoutly for the next two days, and Madame Grampierre gave her high praise for her patience and docility. 'She is as patient as one little sheep,' she observed to Valerie, for Madame was not strong in her English. 'The robe de promenade fits like the skin of a glove; there is only the tea-gown and one other, and then we shall have fini.'

They heard from Gurth once. He was enjoying himself as well as he could under the circumstances.

'The other fellows don't find me very amusing,' he wrote, 'and Redfern lets fly at me sometimes; but then, how am I to enter into all their nonsense when I am thinking of my little girl. I am just counting the hours until Saturday, when I shall be alongside of you again,' and so on. Pansy read to the end of the letter

with a very thoughtful face. Then she went off to answer it; and the rest of the evening she seemed more like her cheerful little self.

On Thursday things were even better. There was no letter from Gurth, but a box of hot-house flowers was delivered by Jem the carrier—a pencilled slip of paper lay under a rose.

'Redfern was called up to town on business, so I said I would come too. As time was a bit heavy on hand, I just made tracks for Covent Garden. You can go shares with Mrs. Thurston, but mind the roses are for your own dear self.'

'Bless his heart!' exclaimed Pansy, quite gaily, 'if he goes on like this I shall be smothered in roses.' But it was evident that the attention pleased her, and she spent half the morning filling the flower vases, until it was time to go to Madame Grampierre; and when her floral labours were finished, the Roadside caravan seemed transformed into a bower; and all day long the brown bees buzzed in and out of the window, intent on filling their honey bags.

In the afternoon they finished their marking, and after tea Valerie sat in the verandah working, while Pansy and Phil played at ball, and battledore, and shuttlecock, much to the mystification of the Black Prince, who thought his young mistress had taken leave of her senses.

'She seems so like herself to-night,' thought Valerie, as she watched the girl's graceful movements; 'it seems as though I have got my own dear child back'; and then a great lump came in Valerie's throat as she remembered that in three weeks' time the ocean would be rolling between them.

'It will be a lovely day to-morrow,' were Pansy's

last words that night when they retired to rest, and her cheerful tone gave Valerie quite a thrill of pleasure. She resolved that every moment of the day should be devoted to Pansy, and that every little caprice or whim should be indulged.

'I will not cross her,' she said to herself as she made the coffee the next morning; 'if she proposes hide-and-seek among the ruins I shall not refuse to play. Phil will be off my mind, and I intend to devote myself to Pansy.'

Valerie's intentions were so good that it was certainly a pity that they should be damped, but in reckoning with Pansy one had always to leave a large margin for moods.

Pansy's barometer this morning was decidedly not set at fair weather. As she entered the little dining-room, her face had a clouded aspect, and she wore her old look of fatigue.

It was no use asking her if she had slept badly; she would only have answered querulously and probably evaded the question. She even resented the kind tone in which Valerie offered to cut her a slice of tongue.

'Oh, I can cut it for myself,' she said, rather ungraciously; 'I have not lost the use of my hands. One would think I was an invalid to hear your voice, Marmee'; and then she bade Phil go on with her breakfast. 'I know a cat may look at a king,' she said brusquely, 'but I have my feelings, Philippa, and I strongly object to having a pair of big round eyes fixed on me.'

'Go on with your bread and milk, Phil dear, and you shall have some strawberry jam,' observed Valerie, who saw how the child changed colour at this blunt

speech; and then during the remainder of the meal she talked cheerfully to Phil, and took no more notice of Pansy, for she knew by past experience that this was the wisest course to pursue; whether she was suffering from an attack of temper or unhappiness there was nothing like a little wholesome neglect for bringing her to her senses.

'In her present mood it would give her positive pleasure to quarrel with one of us,' she said to herself. 'The excitement would be a relief, and act as a counter-irritant, but I don't mean to indulge this morbid caprice'; and then Phil finished her strawberry jam, of which she was inordinately fond, and Valerie carried her off to get ready for her picnic, and did not return until she saw her safely packed in the waggonette between Fraulein Müller and her special crony Katie, with Rough, a shaggy Dandy Dinmont, squeezed in among the folds of Fraulein's linen dress, and panting in an alarming manner from combined heat and excitement.

On her return to the room she found Pansy freshening up the flowers with water and picking off dead leaves; her mood had evidently improved.

'So Phil has gone off without bidding me good-bye,' she said; but she spoke without temper. 'Oh yes, Marmee, of course I know I deserve it, for I was as cross as possible, but it does so rile me when Phil sits staring at me like a little owl; it makes me long to throw something at her.'

'Poor little thing! she did not mean to be tiresome,' returned Valerie, but she said no more. Pansy's holiday had begun disastrously; the storm-clouds were clearing, but she was not quite herself.

'Oh, we none of us mean to be tiresome,' she replied,

'but when one is bad inside, as old Nurse Jenkins used to say, one lets off nasty speeches like squibs and crackers on Guy Fawkes's day. I know I was cross, Marmee.'

'Never mind all that, darling.'

'Oh, but I do mind it; we were going to have such a lovely day, and I have been and spoilt it by my fractiousness. Why don't you scold me, Marmee?'

'I never felt less inclined to scold you in my life. Come, Pansy, don't waste any more time with this nonsense. We will take our work out in the verandah, and talk or read aloud as you proposed.' But though Pansy agreed to this, she was still uneasy, and Valerie found it impossible to interest her in any subject.

It was almost a relief when an urgent message from Madame Grampierre reached them, entreating Pansy to call, as she had failed in matching the trimmings for a dinner dress, and a different one must be selected at once.

Valerie was laying aside her work, but to her surprise Pansy announced that she would rather go alone.

'What is the use of your tramping down to High Street in this heat?' she said; 'I can easily select a trimming and be back long before luncheon; the walk will do me good and work off my restlessness.' And this sounded so reasonable that Valerie did not press the point; but she was much disappointed to find Pansy was absent the whole of the morning—indeed luncheon had been served before the truant returned. Pansy gave a very bald account of her proceedings. She was eloquent on the subject of the trimmings, but extremely reticent about her own movements: still, she seemed in a more peaceful state of mind.

They carried out the programme that Pansy had

arranged, had an early tea and started for Merle Castle, stopping on their way to purchase some cakes and fruit for an *al fresco* meal to be enjoyed among the ruins.

'We have the place to ourselves,' remarked Valerie, as they paced down the narrow paths, for at this hour there were generally few visitors to the ruins. Pansy had always had a strange predilection for the spot. During those early days of her engagement she had brought Gurth here more than once.

The ruins themselves had no special beauty, but the whole place had a tranquil aspect. A few sheep were cropping the juicy grass between the mouldering masonry, and over a crumbling arch a honeysuckle was striving to drape a huge unsightly gap.

Although the walls of the keep and a great part of the outer walls were well preserved and of a good Norman character, the interior of Merle Castle was only a picturesque ruin ; but a part of the refectory remained, with a Norman arch and window.

It was here that Pansy suggested that they should sit. There were some smooth stones which made comfortable seats, and through the ruined doorway they had a charming view. The sense of solitude and repose seemed to deepen as evening advanced, and only the crisp sound of nibbling sheep, and the occasional stamp of a small hoof on a broken bit of pavement disturbed the silence.

Pansy had been very quiet at first. She had seated herself on the grass at Valerie's feet with her head against her, and every now and then Valerie paused in her knitting to stroke the pretty brown hair with caressing touch. Presently the girl drew the white hand down and rested her cheek against it.

'Marmee,' she said, in an odd, choked voice, 'I sometimes think you are the sweetest woman in the world.'

'I am afraid no one would endorse that,' returned Valerie, with an attempt at playfulness. But Pansy was quite serious.

'You have been a real mother to me,' she continued with strong emotion. 'All these years I cannot remember your ever losing patience with me, and yet I must have tried you sorely. I was a little spoiled imp of a child when Dad brought you home, but I am glad to think that I began to love you from the first day.'

'You were always my own dear child,' returned Valerie, in a touched voice.

'Oh, I like you to say that, Marmee. I want to tell you why I was so cross this morning. I don't wish to have the faintest shadow of a cloud between us on my last holiday, but I had been so upset by a tiresome dream.'

'A dream, dearest.'

'Yes, a nightmare, a vision, or anything you like to call it. Perhaps it will seem absurd, told in the daylight; but if you only knew how real and horrible it seemed to me; even when I woke I could not shake off the dreary impression — it has been oppressing me all day.'

'I was quite sure from your face that you had slept badly.'

'Yes, I did not dare go to sleep again for fear I should see those cruel breakers again. Let me tell you about it, Marmee; but there will be no Daniel to interpret the vision for us. I think I was feeling more cheerful than usual when I went to bed, and inclined to take a brighter view of things. I told myself that

Gurth would be kind to me, and that in time I should understand him better, and that we should be good friends. And I remember saying to myself, as I laid my head on the pillow, 'Marmee believes in him, and I mean to believe in him too.'

'I think you deserved the very best of dreams, Pansy.'

'Then I did not get my deserts. Well, I went to sleep, and the next thing I recollect, I was on a tiny island, a mere shelving bank of sand in the midst of the ocean. You cannot imagine the awful desolation of the scene. There was no land anywhere but the few feet of ground on which I stood, not a boat or creature in sight, only the awful grey sea and sky, and the long sullen waves rolling round me, like mighty snakes with white-crested heads ; and every breaker, as it surged against the island, seemed to swallow up a portion of the land.'

'My dear child, what a horrible dream.'

'It was more than horrible. If I could only make you understand the terror of that loneliness and silence, for even the breakers made no sound, only licked up the land more greedily every moment, until at last I had only just a foothold.'

Valerie shuddered. Pansy's voice was so solemn that it made her flesh creep. She seemed as though she could see it all.

'I felt as though it were the Flood, and I was the last living woman upon the earth. I thought I had lived through an age of suffering, too paralysed with terror even to cry out—and then something happened. I felt the cold water washing over my feet—they were bare—and the next moment a little boat seemed to shoot past me, and Gurth was in it.'

Valerie uttered quite an exclamation of relief. Pansy's dream made her feel quite eerie and uncomfortable.

'Yes, Gurth was in it,' repeated Pansy slowly; 'but though he was looking at me, he did not seem to see me. Then, as the water reached my knees, I gave a great cry, "Gurth, I am drowning, save me for pity's sake, save me." Then I saw his face quite plainly; it was set like a stone. "Too late—too late," I heard him say, and every moment he seemed to row farther away, and then something dragged me down, and I woke with a scream, and Phebe heard me.'

'Dearest, I cannot wonder that you were upset,' returned Valerie soothingly, for she felt the girl tremble all over, 'but you must not let it get hold of you. Your brain was a little over-excited, and you had been dreading the long voyage. It is quite easy to see how such a dream was evolved.' But this sensible view of the matter did not seem to bring Pansy any consolation.

'I cannot forget it for a moment,' she said, in the same depressed voice. 'It means something, Marmee,—something that will bring trouble to me. I have a presentiment of evil here,' putting her hands to her breast. 'Do you think that I am to be drowned, and that Gurth will not be able to save me.'

'I think,' returned Valerie briskly, though she had turned a little pale at this unpleasant suggestion, 'that you are a silly child, and that I am a foolish woman to listen to such rubbish. No sensible person believes in a dream; it is rank superstition unworthy of a Christian gentlewoman, and as for presentiments——'

'Well, what of them, Marmee? How often I have heard you say that you could not disbelieve in them.'

'I will say the same now ; no, Pansy, I will not contradict myself, but nightmares and presentiments are by no means synonymous. You are over-fatigued and over-excited, and the result was an unpleasant dream. Now, I am going to forbid another word on the subject. It is nearly seven, and those paper bags are suggestive,' and though Pansy protested that she could not eat, Valerie persisted in laying out on the stone beside her a tempting little repast of pears, peaches, and cakes, and by setting a good example herself, she soon induced Pansy to eat also.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE RUINED REFECTORY

'So I watch the river winding
Through the misty fading plain,
Bitter are the tear-drops blinding,
Bitter useless toil and pain;
Bitterest of all the finding
That my dream was false and vain!'

ADELAIDE ANNE PROCTER.

PANSY had been too much upset all day to take her food properly, and it was evident that the little meal refreshed and strengthened her. And when it was over, and the fragments of the feast collected for the wood doves that built in the copse, she seemed more disposed to take pleasure in her surroundings.

'Marmee,' she said by and by, as they watched the sunset clouds in their glory of crimson and gold, 'it is a beautiful world after all, if we did not spoil it so for ourselves. Perhaps I have been taking too dark a view of life, and piling up my troubles until they seem to shut out everything else. I might have left a loop-hole or two for possible comfort to reach me.'

'Ah, now you are talking sensibly, and like a wise little woman.'

'I have been very unhappy,' went on Pansy, 'so

unhappy that I have been sorry sometimes to know that I was young, and that there would be so many years to be lived before one could lie down and die. It was wicked and wrong to feel so, Marmee. I know that now. One ought to bear one's troubles more patiently, and, after all, I am not the only girl in the world who is not in love with the man she is going to marry. Why do you look at me in that way, dear, as though I do not mean what I say?'

'I am quite sure you are speaking the truth as far as you know it; but I am also sure that you care for Gurth much more than you will allow, and that he is growing every day dearer to you. If this is the Palace of Truth, Pansy, you must allow me to say this.'

The speech was a natural one for Valerie to make. She had watched the girl very closely during these weeks, and she was convinced in her own mind that Gurth's honest devotion and manly unselfishness were gaining an influence over her. She criticised him and his rough colonial ways far less, and once or twice, when Valerie was mischievous enough to find fault with him purposely, Pansy had been very ready with an excuse.

'His father was a blacksmith; you must remember that, Marmee,' she had said with some severity. 'He has not been brought up in a cathedral close. Fair-play's a jewel, and we must give poor Gurth his due,' and this defence had pleased Valerie greatly.

Nevertheless, in reviewing this conversation afterwards, Valerie bitterly repented this unlucky speech, for it called forth all Pansy's natural perversity. The merest hint that she cared for her affianced husband seemed to rouse her to angry opposition.

'If you choose to say such things I do not see how

I am to stop you,' returned Pansy proudly; 'your words only prove to me that I have been an excellent actor, and that I have contrived to deceive you as well as Gurth.'

'No, dear; you have not deceived me.'

'Oh, but I have—when you tell me such falsehoods as that,' returned Pansy, not picking her words in her excitement. 'I have never been in love with Gurth—never—not for a single instant. I was a child when he asked me to marry him, and I liked him—all the girls liked "the millionaire," as we called him; and then father was always praising him to me.'

'Yes, dear, I know all that; but you have been faithful to him all these years—no amount of argument or persuasion could induce you to give him up.'

'No, I was not mean enough for that, Marmee. Do you think I would give up Gurth when he was poor and in trouble? but oh! how I hated the idea of marrying him. I used to cry myself to sleep night after night, and sometimes I felt that I must run away—that I could not face it. That evening when he came to me on the Eardley sands—and I knew what his coming involved—I thought I should have died.'

'Poor little darling,' murmured Valerie tenderly; 'but you need not be afraid, it will all come right at last.'

'Oh, that is what you always say. You love me so well that you are anxious to prophesy smooth things. I should have thought you would have pitied me, Marmee. Gurth is taking me away from all I love to the very end of the world, and I dare not refuse to go; he will be my husband, and he will have the right to take me; but he will have an unwilling bride.'

'If I could be sure of that,' began Valerie slowly; but Pansy could bear no more. She paced restlessly up and down the ruined refectory; her cheeks were burning, and there was a feverish light in her eyes.

'I am going to take a stroll and cool myself,' she said presently; but her voice was subdued, as though she were somewhat ashamed of her excitement. 'When I have recovered my temper, I will come back,' and Valerie smiled and nodded.

The smile deepened on her face as soon as she was left alone. 'Yes, she is beginning to care,' she said to herself; 'the one who looks on sometimes sees most of the game. She cares, but she cannot bring herself to own it; she has a strangely complex nature, and it is difficult to know how to deal with her. I have said the wrong thing; but though her inner consciousness acknowledges the truth of my words, she will deny it sooner than give in.'

As Valerie indulged in these reflections she was somewhat startled by hearing a muffled noise near her on the other side of the wall; it sounded like an animal in distress. Valerie, who was very soft-hearted, laid aside her knitting and stole softly through the archway; as she did so she could see Pansy's black dress disappear into the copse. The sounds guided her to an angle of the refectory wall, but she recoiled with absolute terror when, instead of the sheep she expected to find, she saw a man lying face downward in the long rank grass, with his hands grasping the ruined masonry. Her step had been so light that it had not reached his ear, and as she stood listening, another dry, strangled sob went to her very heart. It was impossible to leave any human being in such distress, and Valerie was about to speak a word of sympathy

to the unhappy man, when the gleam of a carbuncle on his hand arrested her attention. The next moment she uttered a sharp cry, 'Gurth! Gurth! what are you doing there?' Then a quick shudder passed over the prostrate frame, but there was no answer.

Valerie grew white with dismay; it needed no words to enable her to grasp the situation. She could not tell indeed what had induced the poor fellow to return to Wycombe a day earlier; but it was evident that he had followed them to Merle Castle and had been searching for them among the ruins when Pansy's voice had reached him. He had overheard the conversation, and complete collapse had been the result. His agony of mind was so great that he seemed hardly conscious of her presence until she knelt down beside him and laid her hand softly on the dark, closely-cropped head.

'Gurth—my poor Gurth—it is only your friend Valerie Thurston; will you not say a word to me? will you not tell me what troubles you?' then he turned slightly, and she could see his face, streaked with dust and tears, those difficult tears that strong men only shed when their heart is broken. 'Oh, poor fellow—poor fellow,' and Valerie's sweet voice trembled with feeling. Then he raised himself to a sitting posture and dashed his hand across his eyes.

'Ay, you may well say that,' he muttered. 'I have got my death-warrant—I have got my death-warrant.' He stared at her stupidly, as though his own words perplexed him and he failed to understand them. Then he repeated, in the same dull tone, 'When a man's got his death-warrant there is nought to be said.'

'Oh, but there is,' returned Valerie gently; 'there is much that I must say when you are able to listen to

me. Just now you are ill—you have heard things and misunderstood them'; but he shook his head at this.

'There is no misunderstanding possible,' he said heavily, and as he spoke he brought down his hand with such force on a projection of the wall that he bruised it cruelly, but he never winced at the pain: 'when the truth is spoken, there is no misunderstanding possible.'

'Come and walk up and down with me,' was Valerie's answer to this, and she held out her hand to help him to rise, for she saw he was so numbed and rigid with misery that his limbs were hardly under his control; she felt intuitively that nothing would so help him to pull himself together as air and gentle exercise. It was a lovely evening—the sunset glory had died out of the sky, but the moon had risen and would soon pour her silvery light over the old ruins; a fresh breeze played caressingly over the two troubled faces as they paced slowly up and down in that retired corner. Valerie still held Gurth's hand; she had forgotten Pansy; she had but one thought—how she could comfort the stricken man.

'I sometimes think you are the sweetest woman in the world,' Pansy had said to her that very evening; and certainly at this bitter hour of his life she seemed to Gurth like some pitying angel, leading him by the hand: such as may have guided our first parents out of Paradise. For a little while they kept silence, and then the strong constraining power of her quiet sympathy made itself felt. It was Gurth who spoke first.

'I must tell you how it happened,' he said hoarsely, 'and then you will not be blaming me more than you can help. If a man is a fool, he must act according to his nature.' He paused as though in search of a

stronger epithet, and then remembered his companion, and ended lamely 'and I was a fool—that's all.'

'Will you tell me why you came to-day?' she asked softly; then Gurth gave a low, bitter laugh.

'Need you ask me that, Mrs. Thurston?' he returned recklessly. 'The devil or my guardian angel—upon my soul I don't know which—must have put it in my head, for my own undoing. Maybe her guardian angel had a hand in it. Anyhow, I was such a'—another eloquent pause—'such a fool that I could not keep away from her another four-and-twenty hours. Oh, my God! to think of that, and I shall have to do without her for the rest of my life.'

Valerie took no notice of this outburst, but her eyes filled with tears.

'And you followed us here?' she whispered.

'Yes, I followed you here,' in a dreary voice. 'But the place had grown strange to me, and I did not know my bearings.'

'And you heard our voices before you found us?' she continued, for she saw how hard it was for him to speak.

'Yes,' he returned. 'I was just resting for a moment against that buttress, for I was a bit tired and flustered with the search. I thought you had gone home another way when I heard those words.'

'What words?' Then in a slow, dragging voice he repeated Pansy's reckless little speech.

'"I have been very unhappy, so unhappy that I have been sorry sometimes to know that I was so young, and that there would be so many years to be lived before one could lie down and die." It was a pleasant sort of speech for a man to hear,' went on Gurth; 'but I'm bound to say I did not understand

it. I was just groping after the sense when I heard the rest; and after that nothing else mattered.'

'The rest of the sentence, do you mean?'

'Yes; you were close to me, only the wall divided us. I heard her say, "I am not the only girl in the world who is not in love with the man she is going to marry." Oh! she stabbed me there—she stabbed me there—it was a cruel blow to deal the man who had never wronged her, except to love her too well.'

He was standing still now, but Valerie put her hands on his shoulders.

'Gurth,' she said, with mild reproach, 'you should not have listened; you should have made your presence known to us at once.'

'Ay, I know that,' he replied moodily; 'and I was a cad to do it, but you see one has to reckon with the devil in such cases. I was bound to learn the truth, and there was no other way; besides,' and here he turned his face away as though he were sorely ashamed. 'I was so beaten down that I could not move.'

'Poor Gurth. Yes, I understand.'

'I heard what you said, and at your words I was near laughing aloud. She was about right there when she said she had contrived to deceive you as well as me, and that she had never been in love with me for a single instant.'

'Gurth, I am sorry to say it of my own dear child, but Pansy was telling a falsehood there.' Then at the sound of her name his face changed.

'Hush, you must not say that,' he returned huskily. 'If she deceived us, it was for our good; it is her nature to be true. Tell her that it was all a mistake and that I do not blame her—that I should scorn to blame her—and that I will never trouble her again';

and he was actually turning away, but Valerie caught him by the arm.

'Gurth, what do you mean? Where are you going?' but he seemed surprised at the question.

'Where am I going?' he returned bitterly. 'Why, back to London by the first train that will take me.'

Valerie's heart sank. The last train left at 9.42, which would reach Waterloo soon after eleven. Unless she could find some way of detaining him, he would try to catch that. It was only half-past eight, and in his present reckless mood it was not likely that any obstacle would stop him—reasoning would be of no avail. He was not in a condition to listen to any consolation; she could only try the force of persuasion.

'Gurth, I want you to do one thing for me. Do not go up to town to-night. I must see you again; there is something I have to say to you'; but he shook his head.

'There is nothing to be said,' he returned hopelessly. 'You have been a good friend to me, Mrs. Thurston, and I shall not forget your kindness, but I am going back to Mollie—I am going back to Mollie'; but the words were broken by a sob.

'Marmee, what does this mean? What are you doing to Gurth? Why does he look like that?' and Pansy suddenly stood before them with wide, startled eyes and a frightened expression on her face; then, as no one answered, she continued anxiously: 'Gurth, why are you so white and strange, and what did you mean by those words, "I am going back to Mollie"? We are going together, you and I, are we not?' Then a groan broke from Gurth's lips.

'No,' he said hoarsely. 'I am going alone.'

'Alone!' and Pansy's face was almost as pale as his.

'Have you taken leave of your senses? Am I in mine? Gurth, for Heaven's sake tell me what has happened. Why do you not look at me? No, Marmee, you shall not speak. This is between Gurth and me; no one shall come between us. His troubles are mine and mine are his'; and she was going closer to him, but he put out his hand and waved her back.

'Not another step,' in a voice that terrified the girl, it was so full of suppressed passion. 'I will not touch even your hand; it is not mine; nothing is mine and never has been; there is nought between you and me, and never will be.'

'Oh, Gurth, for pity's sake——' but Pansy could say no more; she was trembling like a leaf.

'Nay, I am not angered though I seem a bit rough,' continued the poor fellow. 'I am that fond of you, Pansy, that I would not hurt a hair of your head, but I would not marry you now for all that the world could give. 'No, no, I love you too well for that. Your unhappiness shall never be laid at my door. You shall not be wishing yourself dead, poor child, because I am taking you away across the seas. You shall be with your own people, and I will go back alone.'

'No, no,' pleaded Pansy, and then she broke into wild weeping. 'Oh, what have I done that you should be so cruel to me! that you are casting me off like this.' Convulsive sobs choked her utterance, then Valerie, unable to bear more, took the poor girl in her arms.

'Darling, come away with me, and I will explain what has happened'; but as Pansy resisted all efforts to move her, she continued sorrowfully: 'Gurth has overheard our conversation in the ruins; he heard you say that you were unhappy, and that you did not love him.'

Then Pansy gave a little cry of despair. 'Oh, those cruel words! but I did not mean them—you had made me so angry, Marmee, and then I hardly knew what I said. Let me go to Gurth; I can explain them; he shall listen to me—I will make him listen'; but Valerie held her fast.

'Darling,' she said in a pitying voice, 'Gurth has gone'; and as Pansy dashed away the tears that almost blinded her, she saw Valerie had spoken the truth; they were alone among the ruins.

CHAPTER XXXV

AT THE CROWN HOTEL

'All Truth, all Honour, then would seem
Vain clouds, which the first wind blew by;
All Trust, a folly doomed to die;
All Life, a useless, empty dream;
All Love—since thine has failed—a lie.'

ADELAIDE ANNE PROCTER.

THE last hour had been very trying to Valerie, but it seemed nothing to the one that followed.

When Pansy realised that Gurth had actually gone, and that in all probability she might never see him again, her trouble and remorse almost amounted to despair. Always in extremes, her strong but unbalanced nature took everything hardly: she drank, as it were, her cup of joy and sorrow to the very dregs; her excess of emotion almost frightened Valerie.

'It is my dream come true,' she kept saying over and over again. 'He looked just like the Gurth in the boat, with his stern, hard face, as he rowed away into the distance and left me to drown. Marmee, you must help me; if Gurth leaves without seeing me again, I shall never have a moment's peace. I must see him, I will see him'; and Pansy spoke in a shrill, high voice, and her eyes looked a little wild. She was rapidly

becoming hysterical, when Valerie calmed her by suggesting that she herself should go to the Crown Hotel in search of Gurth.

'There is just a chance that he may be able to catch the 9.42 train to town,' she observed, 'but I hardly imagine that he will do it'; and Pansy seized on this shred of hope with avidity.

'Let us go at once,' she exclaimed, almost dragging her step-mother away. 'Marmee, I will go alone to Roadside; you may trust me, dear, I will do nothing rash; but you must not lose a moment'; but Valerie would not hear of this. They would both hurry back to Roadside, and she would see Pansy safely in the house, and then she would go off to the 'Crown'; but when the girl piteously entreated to be allowed to accompany her, Valerie absolutely refused to take her.

'Darling,' she said gently, 'you must let me judge for you in this; you are not fit to decide this for yourself. Gurth is in no condition to see you to-night—he would refuse to speak to you; the hurt has gone too deep for any words of yours to salve it; he would not believe them, and probably it would only add to the mischief; it would be far better for me to see him alone'; and Valerie had her way. The girl was too worn out to contend with her, but all the way to Roadside she overwhelmed Valerie with messages to Gurth.

'Tell him it was all my vile temper, Marmee, and that I did not mean those cruel things I said; that I do really care for him; that I have been caring quite a long time.'

'Will he believe us, dearest, if I tell him that?'

'You must make him believe it, for it is the truth. Oh, Marmee, you were right, and it was only my stubbornness and pride that made me contradict you.

I did not want to own that I was beginning to care for Gurth after all.'

'Dear child, if I could only make him understand this; but men are so different from us—they do not comprehend all these complex feelings; and, Pansy, I do not wish to pain you, but there was one speech that cannot be explained away, and that Gurth overheard. You said that when he came to you on the Eardley beach you felt as though you would have died. How are we to persuade Gurth that you love him now, when, scarcely three weeks ago, his presence was so abhorrent to you?'

Pansy gave a long shuddering sigh.

'Yes, I know,' in a despairing voice; 'and I cannot take back my words, for they were true then; that day I felt as though I hated him—and then he had come to take me away, and the very thought was terrible to me. One ought to love a man with all one's heart and soul before one goes to the other side of the world with him.'

'My dear child you are perfectly right.'

'I did not love Gurth enough for such a sacrifice,' went on Pansy sadly, 'and so of course I was miserable. He seemed so strange to me, and his ways and his little tricks of speech fretted me, and then all at once I seemed to grow more reconciled. I suppose, though I did not know it, that I was beginning to care—time is nothing in such cases, you know. That evening in the garden I was almost happy; I felt sorry that I was sending him away. Will you tell him this, Marmee; will you tell him that I wish with all my soul that he had never left me?'

'I will remember; you can trust me, dear, that I will do my very best for you and Gurth'; but Pansy still clutched her arm.

'Tell him that he must be just, even in his anger;

and then the worst criminal in the world is allowed to defend himself, and that I only ask him to hear me.'

'I will tell him that.'

'Yes, you will tell him,' and here Pansy dropped her arm, for they were at the door of Roadside, 'but he will be like a rock—very adamant. Oh, Marmee, there is only one more word that I have to say: if Gurth goes alone I will follow him; you may tell him that'; but as Valerie walked quickly down the lonely road in the moonlight, she said to herself that no such words should ever cross her lips.

Excitement had prevented Valerie from realising her own fatigue, but when she reached the 'Crown' and found that Gurth had not returned to the hotel, her disappointment and anxiety were so great that Mrs. Reynolds, the proprietress, who was well acquainted with Mrs. Thurston, begged her to rest and refresh herself before she went back.

'Very likely Mr. Fordham will be back before long,' she observed, 'or you might like to leave a note for him'; and then she bade the waiter take Mrs. Thurston into the drawing-room and fetch her a glass of wine and some biscuits.

Valerie was too much exhausted to refuse the landlady's kindness. She felt she must rest a little before she went back to Pansy. She drank the wine thankfully, and ate a biscuit, but the empty room with its flaring gas-lights seemed to oppress her. The windows looked out on a trellised covered place leading to the garden. It was fitted up with tables and chairs, and was a pleasant summer's evening resort. Valerie had often sat there with friends who had come down to Wycombe. As it was unoccupied she went out and seated herself in a hammock-chair. She began to fear

that after all Gurth had taken the last train to town; very likely he was on his way now, and would telegraph for his luggage to be sent after him. In that case would he give his address, or would he merely desire that it should be sent to Waterloo? If he chose this latter course it was extremely probable that they would lose all trace of him. He would take the first boat that left for Melbourne, and once there, no one would be able to do anything. 'Pansy might write with her heart's blood,' she said to herself, 'but it would not move him. He has had letters for six years—these simple guileless natures are sometimes the most difficult to manage; they trust so implicitly, and then when they are betrayed they lose all faith. Gurth will never cease loving Pansy. I do not believe that he will ever bring himself to marry another woman, but all the same he will never believe in her again'; and Valerie sighed in a heart-sick way, for the thought of going back to Pansy with her errand unfulfilled was terrible to her. 'If we only had a friend in Wycombe who could help us,' she thought; and then she suddenly remembered that Phil had told them that her father was coming back in a day or two.

The idea gave her a feeling of momentary comfort. She had known for some time that the friendship between her and Mr. Nugent was very real and strong, and that it would be possible for her to turn to him in any difficulty. She remembered a speech of his when they had been talking on this very subject. She had been speaking to him of the Dean and all that she owed to him. 'If he had been my father,' she had said, 'he could not have been kinder to me'; but, interrupting herself with a laugh, 'I am not young enough, nor is my dear friend old enough for such

a comparison. I ought rather to say that he has been like an elder brother.'

'I understand what you mean,' Mr. Nugent had replied. 'That sort of adopted relationship that one makes for oneself in later life is generally very strong and sufficing'; and then he paused, and when he spoke again there was something marked and peculiar in his intonation that gave emphasis to his words. 'If the Dean be ever absent, and you should be in any strait or difficulty, will you remember that you have a friend at the Old House, Mrs. Thurston, who would esteem it the highest privilege to do anything, nay everything, that a friend could do?'

Valerie remembered even now the vivid feeling of pleasure with which she had heard this speech. Mr. Nugent's face and manner had said far more than his words. When anything specially moved him his keen eyes would soften and there would be a sweet expression about his mouth, which was almost magnetic in its influence. 'How could his wife's heart remain closed to him?' she had once said to herself, for she knew something of the truth from his own lips. More than once when they had been alone he had spoken of his past life and his poor Louise as though he craved for her sympathy.

The strangeness and silence of her environment, the cool evening breezes from the garden, and her own exhaustion seemed to lull Valerie into a half-waking doze, until the sound of a slow, dragging footstep in the entry roused her effectually, and the next moment Gurth stood in the doorway.

He looked indescribably fagged and dishevelled, and his coat was powdered with dust; but at the sight of her there was no relaxation of the dull, heavy

expression. It was evident that her presence troubled him.

'Why have you come?' he asked brusquely. 'This is not the place for you at this time of night'; and then with the instinct of a true manly man to protect his womankind: 'you ought not to have come; but I will take you back. Come, we will go at once.'

'But, Gurth, I have so much to say to you,' implored Valerie. 'Mrs. Reynolds knows me; indeed it does not matter—it is not really late.' But she might as well have spoken to a rock.

'We can talk as we go along,' he returned doggedly. 'The streets are quiet enough, and these walls have ears. Come, Mrs. Thurston, there's a deal to do, and little time to do it in.'

'But, Gurth, you are so tired. Let me wait a little, while you have some refreshment—a glass of wine or a cup of coffee.'

But he shook his head with a gesture of impatience. 'No; I want no creature-comforts. I had my dinner when I arrived, and I have eaten and drunk for the day.' And then, as she still lingered with wistful, troubled looks, he caught hold of her hand and slipped it through his arm. The next moment they were walking down the street.

There was no time to be lost; every minute was valuable; she must begin at once. 'You did not take the last train, then?' she said quickly.

'No,' he returned; 'I must have lost my bearings somehow, for when I came to myself I was at the wrong end of the town, and then there was no time. I am going to take the 1.34 train instead.'

'But why, Gurth? There is no need to lose your

night's rest. There are plenty of morning trains to Waterloo.'

'That may be, but it is the 1.34 that I mean to take. I had sooner be in the train than in my bed this night.'

Then for the moment Valerie ventured to say no more. She was a brave woman, but this new, strange Gurth alarmed her.

'There was something you wanted to say to me,' he observed presently. 'In my opinion the least said the better. But you have always stood my friend, Mrs. Thurston, and if you wish to speak I am bound to listen to you'; and Valerie thankfully availed herself of this opening.

He did not interrupt her by a single word. Valerie gave all Pansy's poor little messages. She annotated them with earnest and, in her opinion, convincing eloquence. She pleaded the girl's cause as only one woman can plead for another, and her one prayer was that he would see Pansy and let her defend herself.

'No, I will not see her,' he returned curtly, when Valerie paused to take her breath.

'Dear Gurth, I implore you not to refuse'; then he stood still and she saw his face in the moonlight; it might have been cast-iron.

'I will not see her,' he reiterated almost fiercely. 'Good God! Mrs. Thurston, a man must think of himself sometimes; "for pity's sake," you say, but who pities me?'

'I do, Gurth, from the bottom of my heart, but there is my poor child breaking her heart.'

'She has broken mine, but there, I ought not to have said that; she did her best to get used to me and to hide her misery; it was my fault for taking advantage of her. Look here, my dear lady, you have

said your say and I have not contradicted you, but the trouble is that I cannot bring myself to believe what you have told me.'

He struggled for a moment with some overmastering emotion. 'I feel as though I should never have faith in anything again: she has killed it at the roots, and the world has grown a poorer place to me. If I married her we should be the most miserable couple on God's earth; a man must have faith in his wife, or there is no peace for either of them.'

'Gurth,' returned Valerie gently, 'I am not asking you to marry Pansy; I am only imploring you to see her before you leave Wycombe. Do not think me cruel in my persistence,' as she saw the white, tortured look on his face, 'but I ask it for both our sakes.'

For one moment she thought she had moved him, but the next dashed her hopes to the ground. 'No,' he muttered between his teeth, 'I will not look upon her face; I could not trust myself to do it. Mrs. Thurston, I will hear no more. Tell her—tell Pansy—that it is all over between her and me, and that she is free as the birds of the air. Tell her that there is no unkindness in my heart for her, that I love her truly, and shall love her to the hour of my death, and that I ask her pardon for robbing her of six years of happiness, and—and—God bless her!' and here Gurth faltered and moved on.

Valerie walked beside him, the tears were streaming down her face; when she spoke again her voice was broken with emotion. 'I will say no more. I will not torment you. Will you do me one favour—give me the opportunity of seeing you again before you leave England?'

'I would rather not do that.'

'Dear Gurth do not refuse me, it is so little to ask, and it will be such a comfort to me. Do you not see how I am suffering on your behalf? If five years of my life—five do I say?—ten, twenty—could be given for your and Pansy's happiness, I feel that but for my boy's sake I would gladly lay them down.'

Her warmth and tenderness seemed to touch him, and the tense muscles relaxed a little.

'You make it hard for me to refuse.'

'Do not deny me then,' was the quick reply. 'Tell me the name of your hotel.'

'I shall put up at the York Hotel, close to Waterloo,' he returned with obvious reluctance; 'but I am not saying that I shall stop there for more than a day or so.'

'Then you will write and give me your address later on, and the name of the boat by which you sail? Promise me, Gurth; I know I can trust you.'

'Ay, you can trust me. I have never deceived man or woman yet—Mollie will tell you that; but all the same I am loath to give you my promise.'

'It is the only favour I have ever asked you, Gurth.'

'Well, then, I'll make a bargain with you. I'll tell you when I shift my quarters, and the day I sail, and the name of my boat, if you will give me your word of honour to come alone.'

'You mean that I am not to bring Pansy?'

'Yes, I mean that.'

'Your condition is a hard one,' returned Valerie sorrowfully, 'but I will give you my promise. At least I can wish you good-bye and God-speed. Now I must leave you, as the lights from Roadside are plainly visible; you will not wish to come any farther'; then he shook his head in silence.

'Then good-bye and God bless you, Gurth,' and Valerie put up her face and kissed him. But though there was no audible response, the dry sob in Gurth's throat almost choked him as he walked down the road with bent head and heavy footstep.

Valerie let herself in with her latch-key. She looked first at Phil, who was sleeping peacefully in her little bed, then she went across the passage to Pansy's room. Pansy was fully dressed in spite of the lateness of the hour, and was half lying, half crouching on the bed. She looked at her step-mother as she entered, but it was evident that her lips could not frame any question.

'Dear Pansy, I have done my best, but I cannot move him; he has sent you a loving message, but he absolutely refuses to see you.' Then Pansy flung herself among the pillows again with a stifled cry.

Valerie drew a chair to the bedside; then she laid down her head beside Pansy's.

'Darling,' she whispered, 'it is a great trouble, but you must be brave and good. I will help you to bear it. We will bear it together,' and then she drew the trembling little creature to her breast.

CHAPTER XXXVI

DOWN BY THE WEIR

'What would I give for words, if only words would come;
But now in its misery my spirit hath fallen dumb.
Oh, merry friends, go your way, I have never a word to say.'
CHRISTINA ROSSETTI.

VALERIE never went to bed at all that night, she found it impossible to leave Pansy; it was hours before she succeeded in calming her. Now and then she would steal across the dark passage to assure herself that Philippa was sleeping quietly, then she took up her position again by Pansy's side. Even when the worn-out girl had fallen asleep from sheer exhaustion, and in the wan grey dawn the first twitterings of the waking birds could be distinctly heard, Valerie still sat on, with aching head and weary limbs, afraid to move least she should disturb her, and only snatching a few moments of uneasy slumber. But more than once during that long night she had pondered heavily over the strange complexity of the psychological problem that seemed to unfold before her eyes.

'If I did not know her so well,' she said to herself, 'I could hardly bring myself to believe it. No wonder Gurth is incredulous. How is any sensible practical

man to believe in a love which has sprung like Jonah's gourd in a single night? She has killed his faith, and now she is in despair because the dry bones will not live.' Valerie's strongest sympathies were with Gurth, but all the same she was full of pity for Pansy. The girl's heart lay open before her as a page of print, every line clear and legible. She could trace the transition from mere sufferance and apathetic indifference to languid interest and some degree of response, but it had needed this sudden shock to galvanise these feelings into real vivid life.

Not until Gurth had given her back her freedom did Pansy realise that the man himself had grown strangely dear to her. 'Marmee, I want him, I want to go away with him,' was her cry that night; and more than once she announced her intention of following him. Valerie did not attempt to reason with her—she was very patient and tender. The poor girl was suffering torments; both heart and conscience were suffering. 'I am like Esau,' she would say; 'I have bartered my birthright for a mess of pottage. I scoffed at a good man's love, and now there is no repentance possible. Gurth will never forgive me, and I shall never forgive myself.'

As soon as Phebe was stirring, Valerie ventured to leave her post. A cold bath and a cup of strong tea refreshed her, and then she went out into the garden until it was time to go to Phil.

It would be necessary to take the child into her confidence, for Phil chattered from morning to night about her dear Mr. Fordham and the wedding; and during breakfast she spoke a few guarded words that filled her little hearer with dismay and astonishment.

'Their dear Pansy was in trouble. Phil must be

very good to her and ask no questions. Mr. Fordham had gone away, and the wedding was put off.' Valerie dared say no more than this; as it was, Phil was in floods of tears.

'Oh, Marmee,' she sobbed, 'it is wicked to be so disappointed, but I cannot help it; I shall not wear my pretty blue frock now. And then there's the bangle that Mr. Fordham got for me. Oh dear, it was so lovely, and I did like him so, he was such a nice man,' and Phil wept in quite a heart-broken fashion.

Valerie had left her sunshade at the 'Crown' the previous evening, and she was glad of the excuse of fetching it. As Pansy was still sleeping heavily, she took the child with her, and tried to cheer her by talking about her father and Ronald, who were both expected in a few days; but Phil did not brighten up.

'Everything is spoilt,' she said tearfully, 'and I shall not be able to enjoy father a bit. I don't want my dear pretty Pansy to be in trouble. Mr. Fordham is not kind to go away and leave her—if I see him I shall tell him so,' but Valerie had no answer ready. Mrs. Reynolds came out of the office as they entered the lobby of the 'Crown'; she had the sunshade and a small box in her hand, which she gave to Mrs. Thurston. 'Mr. Fordham had gone by the early morning train,' she said, 'and had taken his luggage with him, and had left this for the young lady.' Valerie glanced at it eagerly, but it was not for Pansy. 'For my little friend Philippa' was written in pencil; and to the child's wonder and delight the little case contained the coveted bangle.

'Oh, Marmee, how kind of him not to forget,' exclaimed Phil, as they hurried home; 'but, oh dear,

I shall not be a little bridesmaid now.' By Valerie's advice the bangle was hidden away that Pansy might not see it; then Phil went out into the garden and Valerie hastened up-stairs. Pansy was awake—she was lying with her eyes fixed on the door. She had guessed why her step-mother had gone out. She asked no question, but the sight of her wan little face and half-extinguished eyes moved Valerie to passionate pity.

'Yes dear, he has gone,' she said gently; 'he has left us no message. I shall hear from him by and by.' Then Pansy turned her face to the wall,—her emotion had spent itself, the tide of her passion had receded and left her arid and dry. When Valerie laid her hand softly on the girl's burning forehead, Pansy made an impatient gesture. 'Leave me, Marmee, I want to be alone'; and Valerie with great tact withdrew without a word.

Later on she saw her pacing up and down the little lawn, but she did not venture to join her. 'It is only a phase,' she said to herself. 'I must be patient with the poor child and give her time to recover herself, by and by she will come to me of her own accord and be her own dear self again; I shall be able to help her then.'

Valerie could do little that day; Pansy never came near her. After tea she went out for a solitary walk, and Valerie spent hours of suspense and anxiety. It was quite dark when Pansy came back, footsore, and stumbling with fatigue.

'I am so tired that I shall sleep,' was all she said. Valerie had to be quite stern with her before she could induce her to take a little food. 'What does it matter if I do make myself ill,' she observed fretfully in answer to her step-mother's reproof.

'It matters a great deal to other people; at least you owe me some duty, Pansy. If you are in trouble there is no need to be selfish,' and though Pansy did not reply, she made an effort to eat; then she dragged herself heavily to bed.

Valerie's eyes were dim as she sat alone in the verandah. 'If I could, I would bear it for her,' she thought, with that longing, that comes to every generous nature, to take the burdens of the loved object on itself; 'but it is not given to any human creature to carry another person's cross. I think,—I think if Gurth had seen Pansy's face just now he would believe that she cared for him.'

Valerie slept heavily that night; she was relieved to hear that Pansy had slept too, but there was no improvement in her condition. She scarcely spoke or ate, but she insisted on her step-mother attending the Sunday services as usual.

'I am not ill, so there is no need to stay with me,' she said shortly. 'I am better, much better, alone.'

'I am afraid you are ill, darling,' returned Valerie gently; 'ill in body and mind, but the malady is beyond my remedies.' Then Pansy's lip trembled, but she made no answer. Valerie had spoken the truth, and for such sickness of heart there was only one cure.

But that evening, when Phil had gone to bed and Valerie sat alone in the verandah enjoying the fragrance of her favourite nicotiana, Pansy came to her side for a moment.

'Marmee,' she said with curious abruptness, 'I saw you writing just now; was it to Gurth?'

'No, dear, to Mrs. Walcott'; you know they are giving up their visit to Roslyn on our account. It does not seem quite right to let them do that.'

'They will not mind, and they have been away so long, but still—— Well you must do as you think right, Marmee; only—— only, bid them tell no one else.'

'I am not sure that I understand you, dearest.' Then Pansy made a gesture of impatience.

'Tell no one else, that is what I mean,' she returned with a frown. 'Marmee, I will have nothing done, nothing shall be stopped until I know he has really gone. I have been writing to him,' she went on, 'but I have not finished my letter—it nearly tears me to pieces to write it. When you know his address, will you let me have it?'

'Darling, I fear I must not do that, you know what I told you; but all the same Gurth shall have your letter.'

'You mean that you will direct it to him.'

'Yes, I mean that; but it may be some days yet before we hear from him; you shall know when I do, Pansy, and then you may give me your letter.' But Pansy made no reply, although she looked at her step-mother rather strangely.

The next day Pansy made an attempt to occupy herself. She finished her letter, then she brought out a piece of fancy cloth on which she was engaged, but she put in few stitches; for an hour together she sat with her listless hands folded in her lap; and now and then, as though some sudden recollection would stab her, she would throw it down and pace up and down the lawn with quick uneven footsteps.

Valerie had some business to do in the town, and as soon as their early tea was over, she went out, leaving Phil in Pansy's care. It was a close, airless evening, and neither of them offered to accompany her. Phil preferred to water the garden, and Pansy said she

would help her. It was a relief for Valerie to be alone. These three days of strain and anxiety had tried her greatly. She felt worn and jaded and unutterably depressed.

She had found some comfort the previous day in pouring out her heart to her faithful friend, Mrs. Walcott: 'If a friend is one who finishes your sentences for you,' she had said to herself, 'Mrs. Walcott is most certainly that friend. She will understand everything, and she will make the Dean understand too, and they will both grasp the situation, and their kind hearts will grieve with us.' 'It is no use your curtailing your visit now,' she had written, 'the Dean will not have to give my dear child away, so you must go to Roslyn as you arranged.' But even as she wrote the words she thought how good it would be to know that her dear old friends were back at the Deanery.

Valerie had a great deal of business on her hands; but when the last errand had been fulfilled, she still lingered as though unwilling to return. She had just passed the old furniture shop, and it recalled her meeting with Mr. Nugent on that rainy afternoon; and she was still thinking of their long interesting talk as she turned down by the weir. This was rather a quiet spot, but much frequented out of school hours by the youth of Wycombe. The quaint little bridges which spanned the water and connected the different houses with the mainland were convenient for the small fishermen angling for sticklebacks and tadpoles, and now and then an adventurous spirit with bare feet and ragged elbows would hold the bridge against his companions. Valerie and Phil had often watched the boys at their play, and Phil, who was imaginative, had made stories about the old secluded houses, with their long dingy

gardens and neglected-looking arbours, sometimes children's faces had peeped at them over the low wall. This evening the place was almost deserted, and Valerie sat down on one of the benches partly to rest herself, but also to indulge in the luxury of undisturbed thought. The sense of complete solitude was grateful to her. Though Pansy had not recollected it, the previous day had been the first anniversary of her father's death; but Valerie had had little opportunity for retrospect, 'Alban would forgive me if he knew how much I was thinking of his darling,' she said to herself. 'There is no need for me to be morbid and accuse myself of forgetfulness.'

The sound of advancing footsteps disturbed her reverie, but she did not raise her eyes or turn her head until they paused beside her; then with a start that sent the blood to her face, she looked up into Mr. Nugent's face.

'I have startled you. You were so deep in thought,' he said apologetically, but his eyes were bright with pleasure, and he held her hand very closely. That he was glad to see her was evident to Valerie. She felt strangely shy, but in her heart she was glad too, if only he would release her hand.

'I could not help being surprised,' she stammered, 'I had no idea that you had arrived home.' Then, as though her varying colour showed him her embarrassment, he dropped her hand and sat down beside her.

'I have not been home many hours,' he returned with a smile; 'I wanted to take Phil by surprise, so I went round to Roadside. Miss Thurston told me that you had just left the house.'

Valerie felt a sudden pang of disappointment when

she heard that, if she had remained at home, she would have seen him, and probably he would have stayed some time; but she dismissed this regret as quickly as possible.

'What did you think of Phil, Mr. Nugent?' Then there was a sudden softening in his keen glance: 'I think my little Phil has become a rosebud without the thorns,' he returned; 'she looks as fresh and sweet and dainty as possible; she has been mothered, Mrs. Thurston, for the first time in her life—and it has agreed with her.'

'I am so glad you are satisfied.'

'I am more than satisfied. I am deeply grateful to you for your loving care of my child; but these are feelings that one cannot put into words'; he paused, took a quick glance at the fair face beside him, and then, with a change of manner, added, 'but I was sorry to see Miss Thurston looking so ill.'

'I am afraid she is not well,' and Valerie's voice was full of pain.

'You need not tell me that; but, pardon me, Mrs. Thurston, you are looking very tired and worn yourself,' and his voice was so kind and sympathetic that the tears came to her eyes. 'How can I help being tired when everything has gone wrong, and we are all so troubled?' she returned sadly. And then very gently and with much tact he drew from her an account of all that had happened. Valerie never knew why she said it—it seemed to her quite natural to tell this man the harassing experiences of the last three days—his intense interest, his few helpful words, seemed to lead her on; she felt much as a weary wayfarer would feel if in some desert place a kindly fellow-traveller had offered her a draught of pure water. Mr. Nugent was so human,

so strong, his sympathies were so broad and tolerant, that it was impossible not to respond to his kindness, and then his friendship was so real. The evening might be close and sunless, and the water black and sullen at the weir, but no spot can be solitary or lacking in interest when two human beings first draw closely to each other. Though no word of love passes their lips there is a silent language of the heart that makes itself felt,—vibrating tones, uttering simple words that set the pulses thrilling; pauses, and moments of silence that are strangely eloquent—that leave nothing to be desired; magnetic influences that are felt as Valerie felt them that evening. 'I told him because I could not help myself; he seemed to draw the words from me,' was her excuse to herself that night, but in truth Marmaduke Nugent understood her well, and he played on her woman's feelings with a practised hand as the wind plays on an Æolian harp—bringing rare music from the sounds.

'Do you know, I guessed all this from Miss Pansy's face,' he said presently, 'before my little girl told me that the wedding was put off. Poor child, it is very sad, and then there is nothing that one can do for her, or for him either.'

'Oh, do not say that,' pleaded Valerie sorrowfully.

'Dear Mrs. Thurston,' he replied, 'in these cases one may not play the part of minor providence. *Deus ex machinâ* is hardly safe for us; it needs omnipotence and omniscience to deal with human hearts.'

'Of course, I see what you mean; but——'

'Oh we must have no "buts," we must stick to principles. If you take my advice you will leave the poor fellow alone; give him time to recover himself—such a shock would make some men infidels, drive them

far on the downward road. Probably, from your account, he has lost his bearings. There has been an upheaval, and Fordham is not sure yet whether he is on firm ground or in quicksands. I say again, give him time, leave him alone.'

'I will try to take your advice,' returned Valerie with a sigh. 'Thank you for so kindly listening to me, but I fear I have been selfish.' Then with a sudden impulse, Mr. Nugent laid his hand on her's.

'Do not say that, Mrs. Thurston. You have given me the greatest pleasure that I have had in my life. If there be anything that I can do to serve you or yours, you know that you can rely upon me.'

'Yes, I know it; you are very kind; but I must go home now.' Valerie's tone was timid, and there was a beautiful flush on her face. She looked like the Valerie that Canon Thurston had admired when he wooed her first, and not like the sad-eyed widow.

'I must go now'; and she would have put out her hand to wish him good-bye, but Mr. Nugent had risen from the bench as though to walk with her.

'Our paths lie together for a good part of the road,' he said quietly; but all the way back he talked of Norway and his experiences, and Valerie grew so interested and carried out of herself that she never noticed he was accompanying her to the very door of Roadside.

CHAPTER XXXVII

'I MUST KEEP FAITH WITH GURTH'

'Friendship, like the immortality of the soul, is too good to be believed. . . . Let me be alone to the end of the world, rather than that my friend should overstep, by a word or a look, his real sympathy.'—EMERSON.

VALERIE felt a curious sense of gladness as she went up to her room. Pansy and Phil were still sitting in the verandah, but she did not at once join them. She wanted a few minutes of solitude before she was ready to face them.

'After all, friendship is the very salt of life,' she said to herself; and then as she recalled Mr. Nugent's speech, the warm colour came again into her face. 'You have given me the greatest pleasure that I have had in my life; if there be anything that I can do to serve you or yours, you know that you can rely on me.' 'And he meant it; he meant it every word,' she said softly. 'He is so true, one would never be afraid to trust him. Oh, how good it is to have a real friend'; and the mere thought seemed to rest her.

The next hour was devoted to Phil, who was in a state of great excitement. Her father had brought her some lovely presents, she said, but they were not

yet unpacked. He had asked her and Pansy to have tea with him the next day, but Pansy did not want to go, and so Marmee must take her; and much more to this effect. Valerie looked somewhat alarmed at this suggestion.

'I told Mr. Nugent that I was not well,' observed Pansy languidly. 'I wanted to get out of it, Marmee, so I made the most of my headache; and he was very kind, and said at once that perhaps you would not mind taking Phil yourself; so of course I told him that I would give you the message.'

'It is rather strange that he never mentioned it to me,' returned Valerie in a perplexed voice; but though she said no more, she made up her mind that Phebe should escort Phil to the Old House, but a note received from Mr. Nugent later in the evening induced her to reconsider this.

Mr. Nugent explained that he had been so absorbed in the news he had heard that evening that he had forgotten all about his invitation to Philippa; but as Miss Thurston seemed unequal to the exertion, he hoped that Mrs. Thurston would do him the kindness of bringing the child.

'The truth is, I wish to consult you about some changes I am making in the Old House,' he wrote. 'I want to lay the ghosts effectually. It troubles me to think that my little girl does not love her home. It would be sad for both of us if she does not learn to recognise that she owes some duty to her father. I want to have her sometimes with me, and if only the hobgoblins are expelled, we might spend the weeks of the holidays together. I grow rather tired of the silence and solitude of the big house, and even a child's voice would be a relief.' Valerie laid down the letter with a grave face.

'I shall have to go after all,' she said to Pansy. 'Mr. Nugent wants to consult me about some fresh arrangements in the house, and I cannot well refuse.'

'There is no reason why you should refuse,' was all Pansy's answer; and as it was evident the subject did not interest her, Valerie said no more.

But the next morning when she woke, she saw Phil sitting up in her little bed with the old anxious expression on her face.

'I have been awake such a long time, Marmee,' she observed; 'long before the birds, and I have been thinking so hard.'

'Why, what has been troubling your little head, my pet?'

'Oh, I don't know,' returned Phil dejectedly; 'lots of things. I do so wish father would bring the presents here. Is it naughty of me, Marmee? but I do so hate the idea of going home. I have only passed the house once since I lived there, and then I could not help fancying I saw Gran looking at me out of the drawing-room window.'

'Of course it is not naughty, Phil; but all the same it is rather foolish,' returned Valerie in a bracing manner. 'You ought to get over these fancies because it is your father's home, and he is lonely and wants to have his little girl with him sometimes; and then it is such a beautiful house, and one day when you are grown up you will be its mistress,' but this prospect did not seem at all alluring to Phil.

'I would much rather live on with you in this dear little house,' she returned plaintively. 'I do love father dreadfully, but I can't forget how horrid it used to be. I like father's library and the dining-room, but I never want to see Gran's room or the nursery again—when

it gets dark, you know I should always seem to feel that she or Marthe were coming round the corner.'

'Oh, we need not think of that,' returned Valerie cheerfully. 'It will be broad daylight when we go, and when we have had tea and looked at your presents we shall come back to Pansy'; and this view of the matter seemed to soothe Phil's perturbed spirits, but in spite of all Valerie's words, the thought of her first visit to the Old House seemed to shadow the child's brightness through the day.

Valerie had other thoughts to occupy her, for on the breakfast table lay the letter she was expecting to receive from Gurth. Pansy was not in the room, and Phil was making toast in the kitchen; and she read it over carefully more than once.

It was very short, and far from satisfactory. 'I am keeping my promise to you,' wrote Gurth, 'though I am loath to do it, but I must be as good as my word.

'I have taken my berth in the *Umbria*, a P. and O. steamer. She leaves the Albert Docks about noon on Thursday'—'the day after to-morrow,' thought Valerie with a sudden pang.—'My luggage is already on board, and I am putting up for two nights at the Great Eastern Hotel.

'To-morrow—Tuesday—I shall have to go down to Deptford, on business for a friend, and do not expect to be back at the hotel until quite late; and on Wednesday I may have to run down to the Docks. I tell you this, dear lady, in case you might think of coming up to town. It was good of you to suggest such a thing, and I am not likely to forget your kindness, but it would save us both a deal of pain if you will let me go without any leave-taking. When a bad

job cannot be mended, it is no use wasting time and breath over it. I have made a big mistake, and I am man enough to own it, and I am just going back to Mollie to do the best I can with my life. Good-bye, my dearest lady. God bless you, and may God bless her too.—Yours sincerely, GURTH FORDHAM.'

Valerie's face was quite pale as she replaced the letter in the envelope, but before she could put it in her pocket Pansy came into the room; her keen glance at once detected it.

'That letter is from Gurth,' she said abruptly.

'Yes, dear. If you will let me have yours I will direct it, and then it can go by the next post, and he will have it to-night.'

Pansy did not at once answer, she was regarding her step-mother with a fixed, penetrating glance, as though she were measuring their respective strength of will; the quiet decision of Valerie's manner gave her little hope.

'Do you really mean, Marmee, that you will not let me see Gurth's letter—that you can be so absolutely cruel?' and Pansy's silvery voice became suddenly hard.

Valerie was much distressed. 'Darling, I am not cruel; please do not say such a thing, but I must keep faith with Gurth. It is such a short note,' she went on, 'and I will tell you all I can; he has taken his berth in the *Umbria*, and she leaves the Albert Docks about noon on Thursday.'

'Thursday—and to-day is Tuesday,' and Pansy's lips became quite white.

'Dearest, he told me that he should book his passage in the first vessel that left for Melbourne. I was prepared for this; I knew Gurth would lose no

time. There was a message for you at the end of his note, though he did not actually mention your name, only these words were written, "May God bless her too."'

The restless misery on Pansy's face grew more intense, but she was evidently schooling herself to endurance.

'Then you will go up to town to-day?' but Valerie shook her head.

'No, dear. You forget that I have to take Philippa to the Old House. To-morrow will be quite time enough'; then there was an angry flash in the blue eyes.

'The Old House!' and Pansy's voice was shrill and sharp. 'Have you taken leave of your senses, Marmee? What is a trumpery little engagement like that in comparison with Gurth? Let me write and tell Mr. Nugent that you cannot keep your appointment, as you are going up to town on business,' and Pansy was actually taking up a pen, but her step-mother stopped her.

'Pansy, dear, you do not understand. I am not remaining on Phil's account; it will simply be no use for me to go to town to-day; Gurth will be at Deptford, and will not return until late at night. I have hardly had time to make my plans yet, but I thought of taking an early train to-morrow morning, probably the 9.8, which would reach Waterloo at 10.39; that would give me plenty of time.'

'And you will remain the night?'

'No, I think not; Gurth would not wish it, but if I did I would send you a telegram—hush, here comes Phil, we had better settle things later.' But Pansy returned no answer; she drank her coffee, and ate a few

mouthfuls, then she pushed her plate from her and left the room.

Valerie passed a miserable morning. Pansy showed no inclination to renew the conversation; she kept aloof from her step-mother, listened in perfect silence to Valerie's remarks, and refused to utter an opinion. Her manner was so strange that Valerie felt secretly uneasy; now and then she intercepted a keen watchful glance, on Pansy's part, that seemed to follow every movement.

'She is angry with me,' thought Valerie, 'because I do not show her Gurth's letter, but she shall see it presently'; and then, as she thought of that last precious message, she determined to lock it up for safety in a drawer in her davenport. She took the opportunity when Pansy had left the verandah a moment—she was at the other end of the little garden as Valerie opened her desk; as she turned the key again Pansy was walking languidly towards the verandah; by that time Valerie had her work-basket in her hand. 'It is cooler out here after all,' she said, trying to speak in her ordinary tone, but Pansy took no notice. She was bareheaded, and the sun was hot, but it did not seem to affect her; her restlessness was so great that it seemed impossible for her to keep still.

It was almost a relief to Valerie when the time came for them to start to the Old House; true, her head ached with worry, and she felt indisposed for conversation, but the change would be good for Phil, and more than once Pansy had spoken irritably and sharply to the child, and Phil had been on the verge of tears.

'Why is Pansy so cross with me, Marmee?' she asked, as they walked in the direction of the Old House.

'I did nothing, I only tried to kiss her, and she pushed me away hard.'

'Pansy did not know what she was doing,' returned Valerie soothingly; 'she is very unhappy, so we must be very kind and patient.'

'Yes, I know,' observed Philippa with quaint solemnity, 'and I was so sorry for her that I quite ached inside; but, Marmee, if you were ever so unhappy you would not push me away.'

It was impossible not to smile, but Valerie was spared an answer to this, as just then they saw Mr. Nugent coming to meet them.

He looked at Valerie rather keenly as he shook hands with her. 'Why did you not tell me that you were not fit to come?' he said in a voice so low that it only reached her ear, and then he turned his attention to Philippa.

Phil's solemn little face had relaxed into smiles by the time they had reached the Old House. Mr. Nugent took them at once to the library, where a tempting tea-table was already set out, and on another small table were some attractive-looking parcels.

'We will have tea first, and look at the presents afterwards,' he observed cheerfully, and then Valerie was gently placed in an easy-chair by the open window, while he and Phil waited on her, and all the time he was laughing and jesting with the child. Phil had forgotten all her nervous fancies in her pride and delight in presiding over the tea-tray; and when the parcels were open, her excitement and pleasure knew no bounds. Books, toys, and bon-bons had been purchased with lavish generosity. Valerie tried to smile and look interested, as every treasure was brought for her to admire, but it was a manifest effort.

'I wish I could spare you all this,' observed Mr. Nugent kindly, when Phil had gone off for more spoils. Then Valerie looked up at him with a patient smile.

'Oh no, I do so love to see her enjoyment, and you have bought her such beautiful things—only a headache makes one so stupid.' But after a time Mr. Nugent thought she had had enough of it, so he rang the bell for Emma, and told her to take Miss Philippa into the garden for half an hour; but directly they were left alone he drew his chair nearer.

'I wish you would tell me what is troubling you, Mrs. Thurston,' he said wistfully. 'Of course I see there is some fresh development; I suppose you have heard from Mr. Fordham?'

'Yes,' returned Valerie sadly; 'I had a letter this morning. He has booked his passage in the *Umbria*, and she is to leave the Albert Docks about noon on Thursday; he will be at the Great Eastern Hotel.'

'Do you still intend to go up and see him? I fear from all you have told me that it will be only putting yourself to unnecessary pain and inconvenience.'

'So Gurth says, but I have promised Pansy that I will go, and I must keep my word. I intend leaving by the 9.8 train.'

'Yes, I see. You will be at Waterloo by 10.39; that will give you a long day in town. I suppose you will return the same evening.'

'I think so; but I cannot be sure; I shall do as Gurth wishes. If I can be of the least comfort to him I would remain the night.'

'And Miss Pansy is not to accompany you?'

'No, I dare not take her; Gurth made me promise that I would go alone. It is hard on both of us, for

of course she resents it, poor child, but I am helpless in the matter,' and Valerie's eyes were full of tears.

Mr. Nugent spoke a few brief words of sympathy; then when they had talked a little more on this sad subject, Valerie suddenly remembered her errand.

'You wanted to tell me about some alterations you were planning in the house, Mr. Nugent,' she said quickly. 'I am afraid I have been very selfish, but I am quite ready to listen now.'

'Are you sure?' he asked dubiously, 'another day would do quite well for me,' but Valerie would hear of no delay. The tea had done her head good, and when Mr. Nugent saw that she was determined not to spare herself he offered no further remonstrance, and they went through the house together. Valerie perfectly approved of all the contemplated changes; Mr. Nugent proposed taking Madame Mère's bedroom for his own use; it was the best room, and she had annexed it at once.

His old bedroom was to be fitted up for Philippa, and Emma was to sleep in the dressing-room that opened out of it. A cheerful front room on the same floor was to be transformed into a pretty sitting-room, where Phil could learn her lessons and play with her toys.

'We must get rid of the old associations,' he observed, after Valerie had praised every fresh suggestion. 'I want to have everything done by Christmas, and then if you will spare Ronald to me for a week or two, I think we could make Phil happy between us. We will not trouble about the drawing-room this evening,' as Valerie paused on the threshold. 'I have got rid of the essences and the screens, but another time I should be glad of your and Miss Pansy's advice. There are limits to masculine knowledge,' he

went on with a laugh, 'and the drawing-room baffles me.'

Valerie took her leave soon after this, but Mr. Nugent walked back with them to help carry the toys, as he said.

As they were waiting for the door to be opened to them, he came to Valerie's side.

'Will you try to rest to-night and not take up to-morrow's burdens?' he said kindly; 'it is no use crossing the bridge until you come to it, and you are too tired to think.'

'I will rest if I can,' she returned gently. Then he pressed her hand and said no more.

Pansy was standing in the verandah as they entered. Valerie went up to her at once, and put her arms round her.

'I am so sorry to have left you all this time, but I could not help it, dear,' but Pansy drew back with a quick, irritable gesture.

'What does it matter?' she said wearily. 'I was better alone—oh, much better alone. Marmee, I am going to bed now, and you must do the same; there is a long day before you, and before me too,' and then with a chilly little kiss she turned away, and locked herself up in her room, and Valerie knew it would be no use to follow her.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

'IT IS MY LAST AND ONLY CHANCE'

> 'I watched and waited with a steadfast will,
> And though the object seemed to flee away
> That I so longed for, ever, day by day
> I watched and waited still.'—CHRISTINA ROSSETTI.

VALERIE woke the next morning with Pansy's words ringing in her ears—'there is a long day before you, and before me too.' She felt how true they were as the little clock on her mantelpiece chimed five. It was too early to rise, so she lay and pondered heavily on the painful errand before her.

How would Gurth receive her, and what was she to say to him? In a great hotel would they be able to meet in any degree of privacy?

Valerie's quiet provincial life made her regard a solitary journey to London in the light of a formidable undertaking. She had never been there without her husband, and their one day's shopping lately had been accomplished under Gurth's direction.

The magnitude of her task, and its utter hopelessness, for she knew how futile every effort would be to shake Gurth's resolution, depressed her and robbed her of all spirit; the thought of her return home and Pansy's

despair weighed on her like a gigantic nightmare. 'Do not cross the bridge until you come to it,' Mr. Nugent had said with masculine philosophy, but she felt how impossible it was to follow this advice.

Valerie had ordered an early breakfast for herself, but before she had finished it Pansy came into the room. In her white dressing-gown, with her nut-brown hair falling in heavy masses round her, she looked like a mere child, but the pale, tightly-pressed lips, and the strained, tired eyes, spoke of a woman's anguish.

'Dearest, why have you disturbed yourself?' Valerie said with tender reproach; 'of course I would have come to you.'

'Yes, I know, but I meant to be down, only I had a restless night and dropped asleep about dawn. I did not even wake when you passed my door.'

'I am glad of that; I tried to be quiet.'

'I was so afraid that you had given me the slip, but of course I need not have feared that you would have played me such a trick, Marmee.' With a sudden change of tone—'I know you posted my letter, so it will have reached Gurth last night.'

'Oh yes, you may be sure of that.'

'It was written with my heart's blood—will you tell him that,—and every word is true. It is my last stake, Marmee. I have thrown my all.'

'Darling, you must not talk so recklessly, but, of course, I know what you mean.'

'And you will do your best for me?'

'Need you ask that? I will do all that a mother can do for the daughter who is so dear to her.'

Then there was a momentary softness in Pansy's eyes. 'Marmee, you are so good, and I know I can trust you. There, do not let me hinder you, or you will be late.'

'There is no fear of that. I have time to spare. Pansy, dear, promise me that you will take care of yourself, for my sake, if not for your own.'

'Oh, I shall come to no harm, you may be sure of that,' but Pansy's manner was somewhat constrained.

'And you will look after Phil. Remember, I am leaving her in your charge,' but Pansy shrugged her shoulders impatiently.

'Phil will be all right,' she returned shortly. 'There is no need for you to trouble your head about her,' and Valerie dared not say any more. She finished her breakfast hastily, and a few minutes later was on her way to the station.

She had a small bag with her in case she should remain the night. She was just beginning to feel the unaccustomed weight, when a voice behind her arrested her attention, and the next minute Mr. Nugent had taken the bag from her and was walking by her side.

'I did not see you,' she said rather shyly. 'Are you sure you are going my way?'

'Quite sure, if you are bound for the station; but I believe we are far too early for the 9.8 train. I am going up to town myself to the Army and Navy Stores, and am to have luncheon with a friend in Jermyn Street.'

Valerie felt suddenly embarrassed. What did this journey to town mean? Was it a mere coincidence, or had it any reference to her movements? The doubt made her hot and nervous, and yet how was she to betray her suspicion.

'And you fixed on this train?' The remark sounded feeble to her own ears, but she could think of nothing better to ask.

'Well, it is a good train,' he returned coolly, 'and I

thought I might possibly be of use to you on the journey.' Mr. Nugent's manner was quite easy and unembarrassed. 'I had a letter from my friend Sinclair last night, asking me to meet him in town. As he is going abroad in a few days' time he gave me the option of to-day or Thursday, but I had an engagement booked for to-morrow.'

It was a plausible explanation. Nevertheless, Valerie could not divest herself of the suspicion that Mr. Nugent had made his plans fit in with hers. He had allowed that he had fixed on the same train with the hope of being of service to her. Neither could she be sure that the journey had not been undertaken on her account.

Mr. Nugent did not seem aware of her shy stiffness. He asked after her headache, told her she did not look a bit fit for the day's fatigue ; and then he talked a good deal about his friend Sinclair, who had just lost his wife, and was in bad health.

'He has plenty of means, and a devoted sister, and they are going to winter abroad,' he went on. Then they reached the station, and while he went to the booking-office Valerie sat down on the platform.

'Of course it is all his thoughtfulness for my comfort,' she said to herself. 'He guessed how lonely I felt, and he wanted to help me; it was kind and friendly,' she went on, 'and it is foolish of me to be so nervous and embarrassed. It will not do to attach too much importance to a neighbourly action, and I must try and be natural.' But even as Valerie reasoned with herself she was conscious that her whole being thrilled with gladness when this man was near her—that every day he was growing more perilously dear to her—that her only safeguard was that quiet

dignity which was habitual to her. If Mr. Nugent was secretly aware of her embarrassment he took no advantage of it. He talked pleasantly on various subjects during their short journey, as though he were trying to divert her mind from her troubles, and it was not until they had nearly reached Waterloo that he spoke of her errand.

'I trust you will find Mr. Fordham in when you arrive,' he said kindly. 'I am afraid you will feel lost in a strange hotel.'

'Oh no,' she returned with a smile; 'I daresay I shall manage all right, but I have little hope that he will be in. He told me that he should have to go down to the Albert Docks.'

'And that will mean waiting. If I were you, Mrs. Thurston, I would order a private room for a few hours, and tell them to let you know when Mr. Fordham comes in. The coffee-room will probably be occupied.'

'That is a good idea,' returned Valerie gratefully, but she was hardly prepared for his next speech.

'You must allow me to see you safely into the hotel, and after that Mr. Fordham will look after you'; and though Valerie assured him that this was not the least necessary, and that she was quite able to look after herself, he quietly persisted in his intention; neither did he leave her until he had ascertained that Mr. Fordham was out, and until he had seen her comfortably ensconced in a small sitting-room on the ground floor.

Valerie was not sorry to be alone for a time. It was a positive luxury to lean back in her chair and close her eyes. The feeling that she had some one to care for her again seemed to warm her through and through. 'How good Alban used to be to me when I was tired or indisposed,' she said to herself, with a sudden pang

of remorse as though she had not sufficiently valued her husband's attentions.

But after a time she grew restless, and the little back room seemed like a prison to her. An hour passed, and then another dragged slowly to its close, until she felt she could bear her inaction no longer.

She was just going in search of the coffee-room when the sound of footsteps arrested her, but to her disappointment it was only a waiter ushering in a visitor.

'A lady to see Mrs. Thurston,' he said, and the next moment Pansy stood before her.

Valerie was too shocked and bewildered to speak, but Pansy only waited for the door to close.

'Marmee,' she said eagerly, 'you must not be angry with me. Please do not look at me in that way. I have startled you, but I could not help that. If I had stayed behind I should have gone out of my senses.'

'You did not think of me, Pansy,' and Valerie's voice was a little stern.

'No,' returned the girl sadly. 'I was only thinking of myself and him—that it is my last and only chance of putting things straight between us.' Then Valerie smiled rather bitterly.

'You are making a great mistake I fear,' she returned slowly. 'This rash step will only complicate matters. Pansy, tell me the truth, I will not be angry; how did you gain the knowledge that enabled you to follow me here?' then a sudden flush dyed the girl's pale cheeks.

'I will tell you. I will tell you everything,' she stammered. 'If I have done wrong, I am sorry, but the temptation was too great. It was such a little thing, and it happened in a moment. Do you re-

member that, just as we had finished breakfast, Phebe summoned you to speak to the butcher?—you were just leaving the room when you dropped your handkerchief, and the letter was with it. You know, Marmee, what sharp eyes I have, and I saw the word "Great Eastern" printed on the envelope as you picked it up, and I guessed in a moment that that was the name of the hotel.'

'Yes, I see,' returned Valerie in a tired voice. 'But you are making things very difficult for me. How am I to convince Gurth that I have not planned this?'

'He will believe what you tell him,' returned Pansy sorrowfully. 'You have never deceived him. Marmee, I cannot bear to see you look so troubled, and it is all my fault. Listen to me, dear. I will stay here quietly, and you shall go to him and explain things. He will be back soon—they told me so; he has only gone to the Docks. Tell him I am here, that I have come to bid him good-bye. Yes, tell him that, and perhaps he will believe it,—anything, anything, to make him see me.'

'Perhaps that will be best,' returned Valerie. But she was secretly surprised at Pansy's docility. She did not guess that the girl's courage was ebbing fast. She had taken this strange step, but now that it was actually accomplished the thought of an interview with her offended lover filled her with unspeakable dread; perhaps physical weakness and fatigue had much to do with this terror, her nerves had suffered acutely from the week's strain.

'Yes, it will be best,' echoed Pansy. 'You had better go, Marmee, or else we shall be too late,' and Valerie at once left the room. She was only just in time, for before she had reached the coffee-room she

saw Gurth walking quickly towards her. He had only just come in.

There was a faint smile of welcome on his face as he took both her hands in a cordial grasp. 'Dear lady, this is so kind of you, but I told you not to come.'

'Yes, Gurth, but I wanted so much to see you,' and then as they stood for a moment in the corridor she looked at him anxiously. He had changed even in those few days—the healthy sunburnt face had lost the bright alertness that had been so noticeable. It was heavy and a little wan. Valerie could guess how he would look in twenty years' time, when the reddish-brown moustache had grown grey and grizzled, but the eyes would be as honest and straightforward as ever.

'Shall we go to the coffee-room?' he asked, as two gentlemen passed them. 'It is just luncheon time, so it will be comparatively empty,' and Valerie nodded assent. She was relieved at finding it quite empty, and she seized her opportunity at once.

'Gurth, there is something I must tell you,' she began. 'I came here alone more than two hours ago, at least Mr. Nugent brought me; we travelled together, but—— but Pansy has followed me, she took me by surprise a little while ago.'

'Here in this hotel?' he gasped, and she could see the dusky pallor of his face under the sunburn. 'Good heavens! what can have made her do such a thing?'

'Need you ask that, Gurth? Surely you have had her letter.'

'Oh yes, I have had it all right,' he returned, walking slowly up and down the room as he spoke, and again she was struck with the subtle change which seemed to have passed over him. 'I suppose I have read it a score of times, but I can't get the sense of it

into my head. If I could believe it,' and here Gurth's face was drawn with pain, 'but I seem to have no power of belief left.'

Valerie sighed. She understood him too well. His faith was shattered. His love for Pansy was as strong as ever, but his trust was gone. No will power, no amount of effort, could induce him to believe her,—words, words, words, he had had enough and to spare, he told himself wearily.

'Gurth, I want you to tell me one thing for my comfort. You are sure that I have not played you false, that I knew nothing of Pansy's intention,' and Valerie laid her hand pleadingly on his arm as she spoke. Then he looked at her with a sad smile.

'There's no need for you to trouble yourself on that score,' he replied. 'You have always been true to me, and I am not going to blame you for a fault that is not yours. But,' turning his head away, 'she might have spared me this.'

'Gurth, you will see her?' in a soft appealing voice, 'for my sake you will not refuse?'

'No, I'll not refuse,' and there was something dogged in his tone, 'but it will be the last straw. She is forcing my hand, but after all a man is bound to follow a woman's lead. I meant to have put the seas between us, and not looked on her face again. But she does not see things in my light.'

'And you will come with me now? Ah, Gurth, I am so grateful to you.'

'Nay, there is no cause for gratitude,' he returned gruffly. 'Yes, I will come with you, Mrs. Thurston, but I must make one condition. You must promise me that you will not leave us alone together,' and Valerie reluctantly agreed to this.

CHAPTER XXXIX

'GOOD-BYE, MY DEAREST LADY'

'Without one bitter feeling let us part,
And for the years in which your love has shed
A radiance like a glory round my head,
I thank you, yes, I thank you from my heart.'
ADELAIDE ANNE PROCTER.

THE door of the sitting-room was half open, and Pansy had evidently heard their approach. She was standing by the window, half leaning, as though for support, against a high-backed chair, but her face was towards them. As Gurth came forward Valerie saw that she was trembling from head to foot. For the moment neither of them seemed able to speak.

Gurth was the first to recover himself.

'Mrs. Thurston told me that you wished to see me,' he said, 'so I was bound to come.' Gurth's voice was not quite under his control, and it sounded harsh and dissonant. Only Valerie guessed how it tortured him to be brought face to face with his sweetheart. As he looked at the small white face a dull glow of agony came into his eyes.

'It was good of you to come,' she half whispered. 'Gurth, you had my letter; have you—have you nothing to say to me?'

'Nay, there is nought to say,' he returned in the same hard voice. 'It was kind of you to write—but there, you were always kind, and I would not have you think, when I am gone, that I have any bitterness against you. It was no fault of yours, dear; I'll take all the blame upon my own shoulders. If I had not been a blind fool, the mistake could never have happened; I cheated myself from first to last, and I am forced to suffer for my folly.'

'Is this all you have to say to me?' and Pansy's voice grew pitiful in its woman's pleading. 'Gurth, dear Gurth, surely you have forgiven me; every word in my letter was true, it was written with my heart's blood'; and here her head drooped, and a burning flush crossed her poor face. 'Indeed, it was true, and I do care for you with my whole heart.' Then he shook his head.

'Oh, you were always kind,' he said in the same dull, mechanical tone, 'and you mean to be kind to the last; but there is no need to ask me to forgive you, for you never meant to do me wrong.'

'Never, never, Gurth!'

'No, I'll take my oath of that, and when you tell me that you have grown to care for me, I am sure you mean what you say, and perhaps it is my fault that I cannot bring myself to believe it; but though it near breaks my heart to say it, I cannot, I cannot.'

'Oh Gurth, for pity's sake do not tell me that,' and Pansy's voice was choked with sobs.

'No, I cannot believe it,' and there was something inflexible and final in his tone, that robbed Valerie of all hope. 'I'd sooner die than be standing here telling you this, but I am bound to say the truth.' He paused, and then went on more hurriedly. 'If I were less

fond of you, Pansy, if—oh, my God! if I could only love you less, I would let bygones be. I would marry you, and trust in time that you might learn to care for me as other women care for their husbands; but'—here his voice broke with emotion—'I dare not. I know myself and you too well for that; no, by heavens, I will not do this wrong against myself and you.'

'And you will leave me. Oh no, Gurth,' and Pansy's eyes were streaming with tears, and she stretched out her trembling hands to him. For one moment he seemed to falter in his stern purpose, then he took the little hands in his and kissed them with passionate tenderness.

'Yes, I must leave you,' but his voice was hardly articulate, 'for your happiness is dearer to me than my own; but there will be no putting you out of my life. I must just go on loving you, and there is not a woman on God's earth who could make me forget you. God bless you, dear; I would not hurt a hair of your head; but I must go,' and then he loosed her hands, and abruptly left the room.

For one instant Pansy stood as though she were turned to stone, with her eyes fixed upon the door, then she flung herself into her step-mother's arms.

'Marmee, take me home; in all the wide world I have no one but you—no one but you. Gurth has gone, and he will not believe me. I love him so dearly, so dearly, and—and I think my heart will break.'

Valerie could only caress her in silence; then a sudden thought came to her. 'One moment, my darling,' she whispered in her ear, 'I will be back directly,' and then she went in search of Gurth.

He had not gone far; he was leaning against the

wall near the door with his face hidden in his hands; as Valerie touched them, the muscle felt like iron.

'Gurth, I could not let you go like this, without bidding you good-bye. You are making a great mistake; it would have been wiser to have waited a little'; but he shook his head, and there was no sign of yielding in the haggard eyes and tightly compressed lips.

'No, I must go; but I heard what she said just now; take care of her for me, and good-bye, my dearest lady,' and then Valerie urged him no more. She kissed him, and bade God bless him, and then she went back to Pansy. An hour later they were on their way to Waterloo.

It was years before Valerie thought of that journey without a shudder. Pansy's speechless anguish was terrible to contemplate. She shed no more tears; she moved mechanically, and her eyes had the fixed unseeing look of a sleep-walker. When Valerie spoke to her, she hardly answered; happily the compartment was empty, and there were no curious strangers to take notice of them.

It was a relief to Valerie when the fly deposited them at Roadside. Phil was playing in the garden and did not hear them, so she could take Pansy to her room unperceived. There was no difficulty in inducing her to go to bed; but she would only take a little wine and water. 'I cannot swallow,' was all she said; 'but I am so tired, so tired.' Valerie, who had had no food since her early breakfast, was so faint with inanition that she was obliged to order a substantial meal for herself, over which Phil presided; Phil was full of her grievances.

'If Pansy had told me, or Phebe, that she was going out for such a long time we should not have

waited dinner,' she complained ; 'and then the pudding would not have been burnt. Phebe was so cross about it, for it was quite nasty, you know,' and Phil spoke in an injured manner.

When Valerie went up an hour later, she found to her relief and surprise that Pansy had fallen into a heavy exhausted sleep.

Kind sleep had taken the unhappy girl into her motherly arms, and laid her cool soft fingers on her throbbing temples. 'Sleeping for sorrow,' yea, verily, all mourners know these hours of blessed oblivion.

Outraged nature was taking her revenge. For a week Pansy had eaten little and slept less. The strain of suspense had been like a consuming fever, and had wasted her strength.

Her undisciplined heart had been torn by conflicting passions, remorse, pity, and anxiety ; the bitter birth-throes of awakening love had been succeeded by a passionate longing to make amends to Gurth for all she had made him suffer, and the failure of her hopes had caused this utter collapse.

Pansy was still lying in the same heavy stupor some hours later, and Valerie was resting in an easy-chair beside the bed, when Phebe beckoned her mysteriously out of the room. 'Mr. Nugent would like to speak to you, ma'am, if you could leave Miss Pansy.' Then a sudden thrill of pleasure seemed to quicken her pulses ; but her manner was as calm, as self-contained as ever, as she entered the room. Phebe had lighted the lamp, and Mr. Nugent was standing by the table with an open book in his hand that Valerie had been reading the previous day ; it was Hamerton's *Human Intercourse*, and her marker was in the page. A sentence had attracted his attention, and he had read it more than

once. 'She knew the nature of the man, and he enjoyed in her society, probably for the first time in his life, the most exquisite pleasure the masculine mind can ever know—that of being looked upon by a feminine intelligence with clear sight and devoted affection at the same time.'

'Poor ill-fated Byron,' he was saying to himself; 'but there is Gospel truth in that sentence. When two noble hearts beat in perfect sympathy, they are in the ante-room of Paradise,' and then, with a smile that rather perplexed Valerie, he laid down the book and gave her his hand. 'Will you forgive me for calling so late,' he said in his usual friendly manner, 'but I have only just got back from town. I wanted to be sure that you had returned safely, for I felt somehow certain that you would not remain the night.'

'No, there was no need for that.' Valerie spoke in a tired voice; she was evidently much depressed. Then his voice changed; he saw in a moment that her errand had been fruitless.

'I am afraid you have had a trying day,' he said gently. Then the tears came into her eyes.

'It has been more than trying. I could do nothing —nothing at all—I could not move him.'

'And Mr. Fordham goes to-morrow.'

'Yes,' with a sigh; 'he was very strong, very determined. I suppose it is not possible for a woman to judge a man under such circumstances, but all the same he is making a great mistake.'

'Let us hope he will find that out before it is too late,' returned Mr. Nugent. 'I am very sorry for Miss Thurston; she is not one to take trouble easily.'

'No,' replied Valerie sorrowfully, 'I cannot help

feeling anxious, she looks so ill.' But she said no more.

She must not betray Pansy. No one, with the exception of Mrs. Walcott, must ever know of that ill-advised journey to town. Mrs. Walcott was so generous and large-minded that even Pansy would not scruple to trust her, but to every one else her lips must be sealed.

'You must not lose heart,' he replied kindly; 'Miss Thurston is young and life is long, and the stars do not always fight against Sisera. Don't you remember what Shakespeare says: "Time and the hour run through the roughest day." The tide may turn, you know.'

Valerie smiled faintly; she was too tired to share his optimism. When thousands of miles lay between these two loving hearts, how could things be set right; he might prophesy smooth things to her, but, like Gurth, she could not bring herself to believe them.

'But I am keeping you standing all this time,' he continued remorsefully, 'and you look ready to drop with fatigue. Try to rest to-night before you take up other people's burdens,' and then he shook hands with her and went away.

He had not said much, nevertheless Valerie went to her room cheered and revived. Pansy was still sleeping heavily. Valerie was reluctant to leave her, but she was in sore need of rest.

'There is no use in unfitting myself for to-morrow's work,' she thought sensibly. 'I must sleep if I am to be of any good to Pansy'; but as she laid her head on the pillow Mr. Nugent's speech recurred to her, 'The tide may turn, you know.' Oh, if it would—if it would, for both their sakes.

Pansy's state was less unnatural the next day, but her prostration continued; she was too feeble to rise from her bed, and her one wish seemed to be—to be left alone.

'Do not let Phil come near me,' were almost her first words to Valerie. 'I want no one but you, Marmee, no one but you,' but if Valerie lingered too long in her room she seemed suddenly restless and ill at ease.

Valerie waited for another day or two, and then she spoke to her old friend, Dr. Franklin. He knew Pansy's constitution, and had attended her all her life.

Valerie said very little; the engagement was broken off, and Mr. Fordham had gone back to Australia, and Pansy was feeling the shock. Dr. Franklin asked few questions; he seemed to grasp the situation at once.

'I will look in when I am passing,' he said curtly, 'but you need say nothing to her.' And when he had paid his visit he comforted Valerie by telling her that things were not so bad after all.

'Miss Pansy is a very excitable, highly-strung young person,' he observed. 'If you remember, she was in much the same condition when the poor Canon died, though I will allow that she is much worse now.'

'Then you think her ill, Dr. Franklin?'

'Not really ill, but very far from well; these neurotic cases give us plenty of trouble. It is "the mind diseased," you see, Mrs. Thurston. This sort of shock tells on a sensitive girl; you must give her time to recover herself. I shall repeat my former prescription—plenty of light nourishment and perfect rest, and as much mothering as you like to give her.' And here there was a kindly look in the doctor's eyes. 'If she does not pick up as we wish I should suggest

her wintering abroad; complete change of air and scene are the best remedies in these cases. You can shut up Roadside and take her yourself, and my friend Phil could go too.' But Valerie shook her head despondently.

'I fear that could not be managed,' she returned slowly; but Dr. Franklin did not press the point.

'Well, well, it may not be necessary; let us hope that my patient will pull herself together before the winter. Miss Pansy has plenty of recuperative power, if she only cared to make an effort.'

But though Valerie was in some degree cheered by Dr. Franklin's verdict, the idea of wintering abroad was singularly repellent to her. It was true that no reluctance on her part would induce her to oppose any obstacle. Pansy's health and peace of mind were the first considerations, but how could their small income meet the necessary expense. Pansy's trousseau had nearly drained their resources, and though part of the Dean's cheque was still unspent, it would not go far.

'I am afraid the scheme is impracticable,' Valerie said to herself as she went upstairs, 'but I never realised before what a real curse poverty is. Well, I must just put it out of my mind for the present, and, as Mr. Nugent said, not try to cross the bridge until I come to it'; but in spite of this wise resolution Valerie's countenance was rather grave as she entered Pansy's room. The girl was propped up upon her pillows; she turned a flushed, weary face at the sound of her stepmother's footsteps.

'Marmee,' she said reproachfully, 'why have you sent for Dr. Franklin? I am not ill; I wish I were.'

'Oh hush, my darling.'

'Was it wicked to say that. I am afraid I am very

selfish, but anything would be better than this terrible blank feeling, Marmee. I am so tired, so deadly tired, that I can only lie here and do nothing, and every hour he is going farther and farther away from me,' and Pansy covered her face with her hands.

CHAPTER XL

'THE BLESSINGS THAT GO OVER OUR HEAD'

'Dark, so dark; our feeble feet are failing:
Dark, so dark; no glimmer in the skies—
Clouds are closing all around us, veiling
E'en the starshine from our wistful eyes.'

HELEN MARION BURNSIDE.

IN spite of all Dr. Franklin had said about her recuperative powers, Pansy mended very slowly. Even when she grew strong enough to dress herself, and crawl downstairs, she could only lie on the couch and do nothing.

Of her own accord she never took up a book, and when Valerie read to her she could not be certain that she listened. If not roused she would lie hour after hour as though absorbed in painful thought, and each day her face grew more pinched and wan.

Sometimes, when Valerie had left her for an hour, she would find her in tears on her return. One day when her step-mother was reasoning with her, tenderly she drew Valerie's face down to hers, and whispered, 'Marmee, you must not scold me. Do you know what to-day is? It was to have been my wedding day; but I shall never be married now,' and for a little while Valerie could find nothing to say. But the evenings

were her worst times. In the autumn gloaming she would rise from her couch with something of her old restlessness, and pace feebly up and down the room. 'It will make me sleep,' she would say. Then, with a gleam of her old humour: 'That is the worst of living in a caravan; there is so little room to move. I feel like a silk-worm in a cardboard box. I never pitied the poor thing before.' Phil was the chief difficulty. Pansy never seemed willing to have her in the room. Mr. Nugent soon found this out for himself, and Phil spent most of her days at the Old House. She soon grew reconciled to it. She spent a great part of her time in the library, or in working at her little garden under Emma's supervision; and when Ronald, who had gone back to school, spent his half-holidays with her, Phil was perfectly happy.

Pansy would accuse herself of selfishness in no measured terms, but when the child was present she seemed unable to control her irritability. 'I am fond of her,' she would say. 'She is a dear little soul, but somehow it frets me to have her about. I want you to myself, Marmee. I want no one else—not even Ronald.'

'Get her to talk about things. Don't let her shut herself up too much,' had been Dr. Franklin's advice; but the oppression that lay on Pansy's soul was too great to be relieved by words. It was only now and then that she broke silence.

One afternoon, when Phil was at the Old House, and Valerie was busy over some mending, Pansy said suddenly: 'Gurth is at Port Said now; he was there last night,' and as Valerie looked up in surprise at her, she went on: 'I am following him every step of the way, from Gibraltar to Marseilles, and now to Port Said.'

'If you would only think of something else, dearest.'

'Oh, if I could; but it is just like the treadmill, and I must go on and on. There is no stopping, Marmee. I have such strange thoughts sometimes; but they give me comfort. I tell myself that though Gurth will not let me live beside him, though he has put me away from him, he cannot hinder my following him day by day.'

'I think I understand you, dear. When we pray for any one we love, we feel so near them.'

'Oh, but I did not mean that, Marmee, when I said I was following Gurth. Don't you remember what he said that day,' and here her lips grew white, 'that he would not be able to put me out of his life—that no woman on earth could comfort him.'

'Yes, darling, and I was so glad he said that.'

'I am glad too, now, because those words mean that no one will ever take him from me; that he is mine—only mine—and I am his, though seas divide us. Many waters cannot quench love. Oh, that is so true! Death cannot quench it. One day his eyes will be opened, and he will know,' and though the tears flowed there was a more peaceful look on her face.

It touched Valerie to the heart to see how bravely the girl struggled with the depression that overmastered her; but her physical weakness prevented her from always gaining the victory, and there were hours when her listlessness and misery were painful to witness. At such times she would speak of her dream, and always with a shudder.

'It was so true,' she said once, 'that grey waste of waters, and the expression of his face as he moved

away. It was a cruel dream, but the reality is far more cruel,' and then, as though to herself, she murmured, '"And he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears," and that is true too.' And one Sunday evening, a little more than a fortnight after Gurth had gone, as they were sitting in the verandah looking out on the October sunset, Pansy suddenly broke a long silence that had somehow crept up between them. 'Marmee,' she said in a sad voice, 'don't you think there are worse troubles in life than losing a dear friend by death. If you were to die, I think my last earthly comfort would be gone; but there would be no thorns to wound me. I should just wrap myself up in the thought of your goodness and love.'

Valerie did not answer. The girl's words had touched a hidden sore, but Pansy did not guess that.

'It is the blessings that go over our head—that we miss and allow to pass us, that are our worst troubles,' went on Pansy slowly; 'when we stand beside some tomb, where our hopes are buried, and we see "It might have been" written up in great fiery characters over our head. Marmee, it drives me almost crazy to know that, but for my own fault, I should have been Gurth's wife by now—his happy, loving wife.'

'Are you so sure of that, my child.'

'Yes, I am sure; I am as certain of that as I am that that sun is sinking. Oh Marmee, I feel as though some one had taken the bandage from my eyes, and that I saw Gurth for the first time in a right light—so strong, so steadfast, so faithful, with a heart of gold, and the simplicity of a little child,' and then, in a trembling tone, she finished, 'and of such is the kingdom of heaven.'

It was soon evident to Valerie that Dr. Franklin was not satisfied with his patient's progress. 'We shall have to send her away, you know,' he observed rather gruffly, when he had paid one of his brief visits. 'She is not taking enough food to keep a mouse alive, so of course she is not strong enough to take exercise.'

'I do all I can to tempt her,' returned Valerie in a troubled tone. 'Mr. Nugent is so kind to Pansy. He sent a brace of pheasants yesterday, but she scarcely tasted them. He wanted to take her and Phil for a drive the other day, but I could not induce Pansy to go. She seems to have no heart for anything.'

'Well, well, when I am less busy I will give her a good lecture. Miss Pansy will have to mind what she is about, or she will find herself packed off to the Riviera,' and then Dr. Franklin went off, but his manner had made Valerie uneasy, and for the rest of the day she had a heavy heart.

Valerie had heard once from Mrs. Walcott, in answer to the letter she had written informing her that there would be no wedding. Mrs. Walcott's had been very brief, but it had been full of warm sympathy. 'I have taken your advice,' she wrote, 'for the Dean's sake, for the rest and moorland air are doing him so much good. We shall probably remain here another fortnight or three weeks, and then return to the Deanery.'

The morning after her unsatisfactory talk with Dr. Franklin, Valerie found a note awaiting her when she went down to breakfast. To her delight she found that it had come by hand. One of the Deanery servants had brought it.

'We reached home last evening,' Mrs. Walcott wrote, 'and this morning I shall be very busy settling in after our long absence. The Dean has to go up to town for

a few hours on important business, so if you care to look in about tea-time I will promise that no one else shall be admitted. Do come, my dear Valerie; it will be such a relief to talk to you.'

'Can you spare me, Pansy,' asked her step-mother, rather wistfully. Then the glimmer of a smile crossed the girl's face.

'Of course I can spare you, Marmee dear. Do you think I grudge you a little pleasure. I am so glad for your sake that they are back; but—but—I would rather not see them yet,' and Pansy's lip trembled as she turned her head away.

When Valerie arrived at the Deanery at the appointed hour she found Mrs. Walcott sorting papers at her writing-table in her morning-room. She greeted her visitor with her usual kindness.

'I was so glad you could come, dear,' she said affectionately; 'we shall have such a nice quiet time together. There is your favourite chair, and Morton is bringing in the tea. Just let me finish tearing up these envelopes for the waste-paper basket, and then I shall feel tidy.'

Valerie was quite content to watch her. The very sight of the strongly-marked sensible face seemed to rest her. 'I felt like a half-frozen wayfarer would feel if he were brought suddenly into a warm, well-lighted room,' she said to Pansy afterwards. 'Mrs. Walcott is such a dear. There is such a restful atmosphere surrounding her.'

'That is just how I feel when I have been long away from you,' was Pansy's answer. 'You are both the most comfortable people I know. I think it is because you have no moods. Most people seem to live on a perpetual see-saw.'

Mrs. Walcott did not at once plunge into Pansy's affairs as they drank their tea. She told Valerie about their visits, and showed her some beautiful photographs that she had collected. It was not until Morton had taken away the tea-table that she drew her chair close to Valerie's.

'Now let me hear all about this unfortunate business,' she said. 'Tell me everything from the beginning,' and she offered no interruption of any kind until Valerie had told the whole story.

'Poor Mr. Fordham,' she observed, when Valerie had finished her recital. 'But, do you know, I think he was right to go away. How is a man to live if he cannot believe in his wife's love? There can be no true marriage in such a case. I know Alwyn agrees with me. We both liked Mr. Fordham so much. As Alwyn says, he was a rough diamond, but he was worth polishing.'

'I think so too.'

'And then our poor little Pansy. Do you know I have a theory about her too? I believe that nerves have added largely to the complication. Pansy is not an ordinary girl. There is something electric and mercurial in her temperament. She wants ballast. She was too young to know her own mind. Oh yes, we are all aware of that; and, as time went on, she grew weary of her engagement.'

'And yet she refused to break with Gurth.'

'Ah, that was just a generous impulse; but she was obstinate and stuck to it, and then Mr. Fordham arrived, and she was disappointed in him.'

'Yes, she was disappointed in him,' returned Valerie slowly. 'I think he somehow gave her a shock, but if

she had only been more patient with herself and him I believe it would all have come right.'

'Possibly, but we cannot tell. And now the poor child is breaking her heart for him. My dear Valerie, what strange life-stories we women hear sometimes.'

'I am afraid Dr. Franklin is getting anxious about her,' returned Valerie in a pained tone. 'It is more than three weeks, and she does not get strong.'

'That is because her nerves are weak,' returned Mrs. Walcott, 'and perhaps the will to get well is wanting. We must find her some interest. Very likely if she went abroad for a few months——

'What!' stopping abruptly, as Valerie changed countenance at this remark. 'Has Dr. Franklin recommended that?'

'Yes,' returned Valerie reluctantly; 'but I am afraid it cannot be managed.'

'Ah, there we differ; but I must talk to "my guide, philosopher, and friend" before we hold a committee of ways and means. Do you mean that you are really going,' as Valerie rose from her chair, 'and that we have actually been talking for more than two hours?'

'I know the time has flown for me,' was Valerie's answer, 'but I must go back to Pansy. Dear, dearest friend, you have done me so much good. It always is a "liberal education" just to talk to you.' Then Mrs. Walcott gave one of her lovely, sunshiny smiles that always transformed her plain face into positive beauty.

'You look as though you wanted some one to do you good,' she said gently. 'Give my dear love to Pansy. I do not mean to come and see her just yet. Alwyn is terribly busy at present with this legal business, but directly I see any chance of a leisure afternoon

I will send for you to come and talk to us'; and then Valerie took her leave.

'How is one to refuse such goodness?' she thought, as she walked rapidly home. 'They will all put a pressure upon me—the Dean, and Mrs. Walcott, and Dr. Franklin—and I shall be obliged to yield for Pansy's sake. But such an obligation will be hard to bear even from them; though, in their case, perhaps I should do the same.' For Valerie was quite aware that the Dean was a rich man, and that, though he was a princely giver, and no former Dean of Wycombe had ever been so liberal in public and private charities, he still lived well within his income.

Pansy looked a shade better when Valerie went into her room. She even took some degree of interest in listening to the account of her step-mother's visit, but she was evidently much relieved when she heard that Mrs. Walcott would not see her just yet.

'That is so like her; she is so wise, and always understands things,' she murmured. 'You were right to tell her everything, Marmee. She will be as safe and silent as the grave,' and Valerie fully endorsed this.

A few days passed, but Valerie had not received a second summons to the Deanery, but on Sunday afternoon she exchanged a few words with Mrs. Walcott as they crossed the Green.

'I wish we could have our talk this evening, Valerie,' observed her friend rather wistfully, 'but the Bishop and Mrs. Montagu are coming to tea. Alwyn has seen Dr. Franklin. He is bent on Pansy's wintering abroad. He says there is nothing else to be done. Alwyn quite agrees with him. He has made all his plans, and is dying to talk to you. He will be very firm, so you may as well make up your mind beforehand that he

will have his way. There, I must not say any more. You shall hear from me in a day or so. Now, I must turn back and meet them.'

Valerie hesitated for a moment. Ronald and Phil were going to spend the evening at the Old House. Mr. Nugent had carried them off with him; she could see the three figures slowly moving down the lime avenue, but a curious disinclination to follow or even overtake them made her go back to the Cathedral.

The congregation had all dispersed now, and the vast edifice was empty, except for a verger or two, and the organist, who was still playing. There were lights in the choir, but the nave and aisles were nearly dark. In old days Valerie had loved to linger after afternoon service, and pace the sombre aisles, while she listened to the music.

This evening the beauty and solemnity of the place seemed to steep her soul in profound peace. Her old friend Mr. Palmer was playing an anthem of his own composing that was a great favourite with her, 'The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms, the shield of thy help.' She murmured to herself, 'Ah, if one could always realise that.'

She sat for a few minutes absorbed in the strange beauty of the scene. The dusk of the October twilight hid the splendid groined roof, while the carved stalls and screen in the choir looked almost black; but the reredos was a dream of loveliness. The light streamed on its white stone niches and 'pierced and crocheted pinnacles'; every detail of its exquisite workmanship, its pilaster buttresses and centre projecting canopy was plainly visible. 'It is a poem in stone,' she said to herself softly as she walked up the right aisle. She wished to ask Mr. Palmer a question about a hymn

tune that she wanted to get, but to her disappointment she saw him turn into the vestry; in a few more minutes the lights would be turned out and the doors locked, but Valerie knew the verger had seen her and would give her warning. The way to the nave led her past the chantry of 'the celebrated Bishop of Wycombe.' Here it was almost dark, and just then she heard footsteps behind her; they seemed following her, but she did not slacken her pace until she was near the choir, then she turned her head, and the next moment she was standing face to face with Gurth Fordham.

CHAPTER XLI

'SO IT IS NOT LOVE'S LABOUR LOST'

Say over again and once over again,
That thou dost love me! Who can fear
Too many stars, though each in heaven shall roll;
Too many flowers, though each shall crown the year?
Say thou dost love me, love me, love me—
The silver iterance! only minding, dear,
To love me also in silence with thy soul.

E. B. BROWNING.

IT was either Gurth Fordham or his wraith. For the first moment of bewilderment Valerie believed herself under some hallucination, the whole face and figure seemed so vague and unsubstantial limned against the dark background of the chantry, but the hand that touched hers was warm flesh and blood.

'I have come back, dear lady'—the voice was certainly Gurth's.

'What does it mean?' she gasped; but just then one of the vergers passed them—he had a bunch of keys in his hand.

'We are going to lock the door, Mrs. Thurston,' he said, civilly.

'We must follow him,' whispered Valerie; 'we can talk outside,' and then she took his arm and they walked quickly down the nave.

It was almost too dark to see each other's faces as they turned into the lime avenue; but Valerie knew that they would be free from interruption there. 'What does it mean?' she repeated breathlessly. 'Did you not go, after all, Gurth?'

'Oh yes, I went all right,' he returned, with a short laugh. 'I was as near mad as a sane man could be, and nothing short of chains and bolts could have held me; but,' in a low, shamed voice, 'I only went as far as Port Said.'

'Port Said.'

'Ah, I suppose I came to my senses by the time I reached there, anyway I began to see things more fairly and to look at them in a different light; it seemed to me that I had been a bit hard and masterful, and too cock-sure of everything, and then I read over her letter again!'

'Yes—yes—oh, please go on, Gurth,' for he had paused, as though he found it difficult to speak; and she pressed his arm gently as though to encourage him. How sweet the sound of the kind, homely voice was in her ears. Once it had seemed to her rough and uncultured, but now no voice could have pleased her more. It was too dark to see his expression, but his caught breath and abrupt, uneven sentences told her that he was greatly moved.

'You were right, dear lady, and I was wrong,' he said simply. 'I felt that when I read over her dear letter. I think I know every sentence by heart. Do you remember what she told me—the darling—that she had written every word with her heart's blood?'

'Yes, I remember, Gurth.'

'My God, shall I ever forget that night? I was up on deck, and the moon was as bright as day; we were

expecting to reach Port Said in another forty-eight hours, and I knew we should stop there.

'My brain had been in a tumult ever since we had left Gibraltar. It seemed as though my mind had got the ague; first the heat fit, and then the cold would take hold of me, and I was never an hour in the same condition.'

'Poor fellow. I can understand so well all you went through'; but he shook his head at that.

'I hope not, I think not! I never knew before how pride and stubbornness can master a man. It seemed sometimes as though I were fighting against myself and her too—but there, if I were to talk all night I could not make things clear to you. All through the voyage her words were never out of my ears day and night—day and night!—those words I heard her say when I was outside the door—"In all the wide world I have no one but you—no one but you"—and it was to you, dear lady, that she said it, but no dagger's point could have been half so sharp as those words, they hurt me cruelly'; and here Gurth's voice grew husky with emotion; 'and then "Gurth has gone, and he will not believe me, and I love him so dearly—so dearly, and I think my heart will break."'

'My poor Pansy, but she was speaking the truth then.'

'I know that now,' he returned slowly, 'but my eyes were too holden with pride and misery to judge things clearly; my one idea was to give her back her freedom, and to let the seas part us, but when the clouds lifted a bit, and I could see a gleam of light, I made up my mind that I had been a fool and a coward.'

'Oh no, Gurth, never a coward; it was only that your troubles weighed upon you so heavily, and that your pain blinded you.'

'Maybe you are right,' he returned; 'for the last month has seemed to me like a horrible nightmare. But that night, as I paced the deck in the moonlight, I faced things like a man, and then I made up my mind that I would give her another chance. I knew I should soon get a home-coming steamer at Port Said, and I was right. I made things square with the captain, and then I shifted my quarters to the *Atalanta*, and thirty-six hours after we reached Port Said I was afloat again, but this time my face was turned towards England.'

'Thank God you have come, my dear Gurth. I feared greatly that the awakening would not come for many a long month. Then you only arrived in Wycombe this afternoon?'

'Yes; I was at my old quarters, the "Crown," two or three hours ago. I had my luncheon and tidied myself a bit, and then I remembered that you would be at the Cathedral, and I made up my mind to follow you. I was in the nave when you passed me on your way to the choir, but I did not dare to attract your attention. But where—why was not Pansy with you?' and Gurth's voice was a little anxious.

For a moment Valerie hesitated, she was so unwilling to give him pain.

'There is nothing wrong—she is not ill?' he asked uneasily.

'Not really ill, but she is very far from well,' returned Valerie. 'You know how sensitive the poor child is, and all this trouble has upset her; she has grown so thin and weak that Dr. Franklin wishes her to winter abroad.'

'Good heavens! and it is all my fault,' he groaned.

'No, Gurth, you shall not say that,' replied Valerie

warmly. 'Pansy has only herself to blame for her mistakes; she has not known her own mind and has been self-willed, and refused to be guided by other people's advice. But indeed she is better, and the knowledge that you have forgiven her waywardness and that you really believe in her will be her best cure.'

'Then why do we not go to her?' exclaimed Gurth, standing still as though in bewilderment. 'Dear lady, this is not the way to Roadside'; then Valerie gave a low, amused laugh.

'No indeed, I only brought you here that we might talk undisturbed; but it is very late, and Pansy will be wondering at my delay'; and then, as they walked on quickly, Valerie explained that they must be very careful not to give Pansy a shock; she had had one or two attacks of faintness lately, and any sudden surprise might upset her.

Valerie had her latch-key, so that they could slip quietly into the house, and Gurth could wait in the dark dining-room a few minutes while she prepared Pansy for the unexpected visitor; Gurth reluctantly agreed to this.

'You will not keep me long?' he urged, as the lights from Roadside streamed out across the road; and Valerie could feel the muscles of his arm quivering under her hand with suppressed agitation. Valerie shook her head as she put the key in the door. She was just drawing back to let Gurth slip past her into the dining-room when Pansy came suddenly out of the sitting-room. She had heard footsteps, and had meant to open the door for her step-mother. She stood framed in the doorway, a shadowy little figure, in her grey gown, with her brown hair looking dark against the small white face. For one instant, as she caught

sight of Gurth, she seemed as though turned to stone, but Valerie with anxious tenderness put herself between them.

'Darling, I wanted to prepare you,' she exclaimed. 'It is no dream, it is really Gurth, your own Gurth come back to you'; then a smile of almost infantile sweetness crossed the girl's face.

'My Gurth come back to me,' she murmured, and she stretched out her arms to him as a child would to a mother who had been long absent. The next moment Gurth's were round her, and he almost lifted her over the threshold. Valerie closed the door softly upon them and went up to her room. She had no fears now; she had seen the radiance in Pansy's eyes, she could safely leave her to Gurth.

'She was not surprised except for a moment,' she said to herself, 'she was only happy. Is that how we shall feel when we wake in the other world? Shall we smile at our first sight of our guardian angel, bending over us with calm, unfathomable eyes of love, as we lie, tired children, basking in the sunlight of paradise. Even on earth "perfect love casteth out fear." Pansy loves, and for her, paradise has begun.'

Half an hour later Gurth was still kneeling beside the couch, and Pansy lay looking at him with wondering, happy eyes; her hands were clasped in his.

'God has been very good to me,' she whispered, 'and I have not deserved it. Oh, Gurth, to know that you have come back to me, and that we shall never part again!'

'Never again, I'll take my oath on that, darling,' returned Gurth impetuously; 'a man does not leave his belongings behind him, and you are mine, sweetheart, I know that now, though the wonder of it will never cease.'

'Yes, I am yours, for time and eternity,' she returned solemnly, 'and you are my own Gurth, who has loved me and waited for me all these years. Gurth,' and here she put her arms round his neck, 'I want to tell you something—you have been so good, and have told me all I wanted to know, and I have said so little.'

'There was nought for you to say, dear,' he returned gently, 'and I had your letter.'

'Ah, my poor letter,' she returned; 'but it has brought you back. Some day we will burn it together. I want to tell you why I was not more surprised this evening when I saw you standing behind Marmee. You were as pale as a ghost, Gurth, and your eyes looked so big and solemn, but all the same I knew it was no ghost.'

'You looked so ill, darling, and I was almost too scared to speak to you.'

'Yes, I could read that in your eyes, and I read something else too,' and here Pansy's smile almost overpowered Gurth; in his humility he could hardly yet grasp the fact that the girl's wayward heart was so completely won, and the gentleness and sweetness with which she treated him seemed to turn him dizzy with happiness.

'Marmee was afraid too,' went on Pansy; 'she thought the surprise would be too sudden for me, but you neither of you guessed that it was no surprise at all'; and as Gurth looked astonished at this, she went on—'For the last week I have had such a curious feeling, as though every day you were nearer to me. I was ashamed to say anything to Marmee, but one night I woke up suddenly, saying to myself, "Gurth is not far away, and to-morrow he will be nearer," and though I could make no sense of the words, and could not

understand them myself, the feeling was strong upon me, that either you were dead, or else that you would come back to me.'

Gurth did not seem able to speak, his only answer was to kiss the little hands that were clinging so confidingly to him. But Pansy did not misunderstand his silence; she knew that the man who was kneeling beside her worshipped her with every thought and fibre of his strong, faithful heart, and now, for the first time, her whole nature was making willing and glad response. 'I had been very restless all day,' she went on, 'but I was not unhappy; I felt as though something were going to happen. Marmee was so late, that I thought I would go to the door and look down the road for her; then I heard footsteps that did not sound like Ronald's, and the door opened—and—and you were looking at me.' But here she threw herself on his breast—'Oh my dear, my dear, I had no room in my head for anything but gladness then.'

Gurth rested his face against the soft brown head. At that moment his thankfulness was too great for expression, but what silent vows were uttered in the depth of his heart. 'God do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part me and thee,' he could have cried in the old sacred language; but the next minute he remembered the girl's weakness, and blamed himself for his want of thought.

'But, Gurth, I am not tired,' she assured him, trying to detain him with gentle force; and then Valerie came into the room. 'Marmee, do help me,' exclaimed Pansy, with her old childlike impetuosity; 'Gurth wants to leave me because he thinks I am tired, but I cannot let him go.'

'Suppose we all have some tea first,' returned

Valerie, bringing a pleasant atmosphere of matter-of-fact, ordinary life with her, that was almost a relief to Gurth. All this time he had controlled his own excitement for Pansy's sake; he could have overwhelmed her with a torrent of tenderness, but the fear of hurting her had forced him to keep silence; but the effort had tried him. He sat in an easy-chair beside the couch, weary and happy, while Valerie presided at her little tea-table and talked to them both, in her quiet, gentle way. When the meal was over she sent him away.

'Now you must go,' she said to him; 'but if you are good you shall come and spend the day here to-morrow.—Indeed I really mean it, Pansy,' as the girl looked at her wistfully. 'You have talked far too much already, and I ought to have sent Gurth away half an hour ago.' Then she went to the door, and a minute later he joined her.

'You were right to send me away,' he said. 'It goes to my heart to see her lying there like a baby looking so weak, and without a tinge of colour in her face; but, please God, we shall soon have her strong again.'

'I do not doubt it for a moment,' returned Valerie cheerfully; 'Dr. Fordham's prescription is far better than Dr. Franklin's,' and then Gurth gave one of his old laughs.

'Marmee, I am far too happy to sleep,' were Pansy's last words that night, 'but I shall be quite content to lie awake and say my Te Deum. Gurth has been so dear, so dear; when I think of his goodness and how I treated him, I am ready to grovel in the dust with shame.'

'I don't think Gurth would care to see you do that.'

'No indeed, but all the same I cannot forgive myself for having been such a little fool'; and then, as

Valerie stooped over her for a good-night kiss, Pansy drew her down and whispered, 'I think I should be too happy but for one thing.'

'What is that, my darling?'

'That I must leave you, Marmee.' But here Valerie's soft hand was laid on the girl's lips. She would hear no more, she said firmly; nothing should mar the brightness of the day—to-morrow would bring its own burdens—for this night at least they would rest and be thankful.

Later that night, as Valerie sat reading in her own room, her attention was attracted by footsteps passing and repassing under her window with a sort of sentinel-like precision. She stole to the window and peeped out. The next moment she threw up the sash.

'Gurth!' she exclaimed, as the dark figure came towards her, 'what on earth are you doing here at this time of night?—it is nearly half-past eleven.'

'Yes, I know,' in an embarrassed voice, as though he had been discovered in a fault. 'Don't let her hear, Mrs. Thurston, but when I got back to the hotel I could not rest. I got it into my head that I had been dreaming and that it could not be true. I worked myself into such a fever at last that I was forced to come back here. I have been thinking it all over for the last hour and a half, and I am cooler and more rational now. Don't laugh at me, my dear lady—if you knew the rest it was just to walk up and down this bit of pavement, with the stars over my head to remind me of my little Eyebright.'

'You dear fellow,' murmured Valerie to herself, and there were tears in her eyes; then aloud, 'I am not laughing, Gurth—far from it. But you will go back now—will you not?'

'Yes, I will go back,' returned Gurth reluctantly, 'but I would sooner be here than in any bed to-night,' and then he went slowly away and she closed her window.

The next morning Valerie went down to the Deanery, so early that the Dean and Mrs. Walcott were still at their breakfast; they were reading their letters and taking counsel together in their usual comfortable way. Mrs. Walcott's shrewd, kindly eyes soon detected that some special errand had brought their visitor.

'You have some good news for us, Valerie,' she said at once, but both she and the Dean were utterly amazed when they heard of Gurth's return. The Dean was so excited that he pushed away his letters and papers.

'So it is not Love's Labour Lost, after all,' he chuckled. 'Well, Margaret, did I not always tell you that Fordham was a fine fellow? You ladies were a bit down on him because he was rough and colonial, but I always told you he had real grit.'

'I thought so too, Alwyn.'

'Ay, we generally agree about things. Now look here, Valerie, I want to have a talk with Fordham. Ask him to call at the Deanery when he is passing. I am going to give him a bit of my mind. If he takes my advice he will just make hay while the sun shines.'

'What do you mean, Mr. Dean?' asked Valerie; but she knew well enough what his answer would be.

'I shall tell him to stand no more nonsense and to marry the girl as soon as possible,' and then the Dean gathered up his papers and retreated to the study; and Mrs. Walcott took Valerie into the morning-room for a comfortable talk.

CHAPTER XLII

GURTH TAKES COUNSEL

She loves thee even as far-forth than
As any woman may a man;
And is thy own, and so she says,
And cares for thee ten thousand ways.—SURREY.

FOR the next few days the Roadside caravan, as Pansy still called it, was transformed into a veritable bower of bliss. The reunited lovers were always together, and so absorbed in each other that at times even Valerie felt herself in the way, and could sympathise with Phil when she said it was no use talking to Pansy and Mr. Fordham, for they neither of them heard anything she said. 'They are always wanting me to go and play in the next room, Marmee,' she complained, 'because Pansy cannot bear any noise; and yet I can hear them talking the whole time, and they are never silent a minute. Do engaged people always want a room to themselves?' but Valerie skilfully evaded this question. It is the one who looks on who sees the most of the game; and to Valerie it sometimes seemed as though a touching little idyll were being enacted before her eyes.

It was beautiful to see Gurth's tenderness and thoughtful care for the girl, and how Pansy in her

weakness and helplessness rested in his strength. No one would call Gurth rough who watched his little ways with her. Love, the divine instructress, was teaching him her noblest lessons; and his simple nature and innate goodness of heart made him a docile pupil.

'He would put to shame the finest gentleman in the land,' Valerie once said to Mrs. Walcott. 'No one would believe he is only a blacksmith's son.'

Nevertheless both she and Pansy instinctively realised that a change had taken place in him. The furnace through which he had passed during those hopeless weeks had left scathing marks on the man's soul which a lifetime of happiness would not wholly efface. It was Pansy who discovered the first grey hairs on his head, and wept at the sight; and it was she who observed so sadly to her step-mother that though Gurth was dearer than ever, he seemed somehow older, and indeed there was at times a grave abstraction in his manner, from which he aroused himself with difficulty.

Now and then Pansy's sensitiveness led to a slight misunderstanding; once when Valerie was with them, and Pansy had given vent to one of her childlike sallies, which was half jest and half earnest, there had been no answering smile on Gurth's face, and his answer was so curt and grave that Pansy relapsed into silence, and a few minutes later she quietly left the room; but for once Gurth failed to notice it.

When Valerie went into the dining-room shortly afterwards, she found Pansy in floods of tears and quite inconsolable.

'Oh, Marmee, I am so unhappy,' she exclaimed. 'I have hurt Gurth—he thinks I was laughing at him—and I did so pray that I might never hurt him

again. When he looks like that it breaks my heart, because it reminds me of what I made him suffer,' and Pansy wept so passionately, and was so determined not to be comforted, that Valerie did the best thing under the circumstances—she went to Gurth and told him the truth.

He looked first startled, and then rather ashamed of himself; finally he went in search of his sweetheart.

'What's to do, darling?' was all he said, as he took the weeping little creature into his arms. Then as he fondled and caressed her, Pansy told her grievance.

'She had been thoughtless and had hurt him, and she could not bear it. His grave looks had frightened her, and she had not been able to speak to him.' But Gurth only gave one of his big boyish laughs.

'Hurt me, my darling! nay, nay, that's too good a joke; it was only that I forgot my manners, and was thinking over a bit of business. Let me tell you about it, sweetheart, and then you will be ready to laugh at it too. I had a letter from Mallinson this morning, on the subject of a branch business over here; and I was so busy over his arguments, and all the pros and cons, that the sense of what you were saying slipped past me, and so I let you leave the room without a word.'

'And you were not really hurt, Gurth?' and Pansy's voice had its old joyous sound.

'No, my little blessing, not even you will have the power to hurt me again. Now, I am going to take you for a stroll in the sunshine, and we will talk over Mallinson's letter comfortably.'

A day or two after this, as Valerie sat at work in the sitting-room, she saw Gurth and Pansy pass the window on their return from their morning walk.

Pansy was still far from strong, and the stroll was only a short one, but on fine days he would take her and Valerie for a drive, and these expeditions were already bringing back the colour to Pansy's cheek. Gurth had been ten days at Wycombe, but as yet there had been no talk of the marriage; but this morning, as he came and sat down beside Valerie, there was a look in his face that warned her of his purpose.

'Where is Pansy?' she asked, with a keen glance at him.

'She will be here directly,' he returned; 'she wanted me to tell you something first, dear lady,' for this was how he always addressed her, and it had grown to Valerie a term of endearment. 'I was at the Deanery after I left you last night, and the Dean and I had some talk together.'

'Yes, Gurth.'

'Dr. Franklin was there too, part of the time; one of the servants was ill, and that brought him, so I was able to put some questions to him. He is a capital fellow,' continued Gurth enthusiastically; 'as a doctor he beats the record, and I would pin my faith to him. He says the voyage to Melbourne will just set my little girl up—that in his opinion it will make a woman of her, and that the sooner she goes the better; and the Dean agreed with him.'

Valerie laid aside her work, for her hands were not quite steady. 'Tell me all about it,' she said quietly; and Gurth, who had feared to startle her, was reassured by her manner.

'They had made their plans,' he said. 'Dr. Franklin and the Dean had given him the lead, and he had been glad to act on their advice. He had spoken to Pansy that morning, and she had consented

to everything, and now they only wanted their dear lady's approval.'

'And the plan,' asked Valerie faintly. But this, according to Gurth, was perfectly simple.

The *Maritana*, a first-class vessel, one of the best on the line, would start in ten days' time for Melbourne, and he proposed going up to town that very afternoon to take their berths. They would be married early in the morning that day week; the Dean had offered to perform the ceremony, and Dr. Franklin would give Pansy away. It would be perfectly quiet; no one need know that the wedding was to take place. The Dean insisted that they should have breakfast at the Deanery, and then they would stay at a quiet hotel in town until it was time to go on board. The journey to London was so short that Dr. Franklin thought it would not fatigue Pansy, but in her nervous condition it would be advisable to avoid leave-takings as much as possible.

Valerie sat for a few minutes silently revolving Gurth's scheme; it was very sudden, but by no means impracticable.

Pansy's modest little outfit had been long ready, and would only take a few hours to pack. No preparations would be needed for the quiet wedding that the Dean had proposed,—not a creature in Wycombe need know of it. Mr. Nugent could be told and bound over to secrecy; Pansy would be married in her travelling dress, and the good-byes would be said at the Deanery. Valerie's eyes were a little misty when she reached this point, but she bravely crushed down her own pain at the thought of the parting.

'My dear,' she said gently, 'I think you and Dr. Franklin are right, and that it will be better for Pansy

to take her away from here.' Then her clear voice faltered a little. 'I know you will take care of my child, Gurth; thank God, I can trust you as though you were my own son,' and then for a moment she could say no more.

And so it was settled. Pansy joined them, and they had a long talk together, and in the afternoon Valerie went over to the Deanery.

She was very pale, but as composed and business-like as ever, and could not be induced to speak of herself.

'Never mind about me,' she said, when the Dean commended her for being a brave woman; 'we have only to consider Pansy just now. We are acting on Dr. Franklin's advice; he says she will never get strong here—that Wycombe never suited her.'

'I used to tell the Canon so in the old days,' returned the Dean, 'but I never could bring him to see it. So Fordham has gone up to town, has he? He is a practical fellow, and does not let the grass grow under his feet.'

'He will not be back until to-morrow evening,' returned Valerie. 'Pansy was looking rather dull when I left; I am afraid she is thinking of the last time he went away.' And then, after a little more talk, she hurried back to Roadside.

That evening, as they sat by the fireside in the twilight, while Phil ironed out a vast number of doll's garments under Phebe's supervision, Pansy left her couch and sat down on the rug at Valerie's feet.

'Marmee,' she said, as she rested her cheek caressingly against the hands that lay so quietly folded together, 'you have been so dear and good to-day, so calm and helpful, and thinking of every one but yourself.'

'You must not flatter me, darling,' returned Valerie, 'I am afraid I am not quite so good as you think.'

'Are you not? I fancy Gurth and I hold a very different opinion. He thinks you just the sweetest woman he has ever seen, and his one regret is that Mollie will not see you. It is so like you, dear, not to say a word about your own trouble and loneliness.'

'Do you think talking makes things easier, Pansy?' and then very sadly, 'nothing will ever make me miss you less'; then Pansy's eyes grew troubled.

'Poor, dear Marmee,' she whispered, 'I shall miss you too, but I shall have Gurth, that makes all the difference. Dear, there is something I must tell you that will make you feel a little happier. Gurth does not think that we shall be long parted, very likely in two or three years we shall come back to England.'

'Do you mean that Gurth will bring you back to see me?' asked Valerie in a tone of intense surprise.

'No, dear, I mean something much better than that; what, did he not tell you about Mr. Mallinson's letter? The old idea of a branch business in England is cropping up again, and Gurth thinks that in two or three years it will certainly be carried out. When we return it will be for good, Marmee; what do you think of my news now?' but Valerie's heart was too full to answer this question. The parting would not be so dreadful after all. Pansy would come back to her. What were two or three years of absence if the child were happy?

'Do you feel better now?' persisted Pansy, caressingly. 'Marmee, don't you love Gurth for this. He is doing it for our sakes, because he knows what we are to each other. He will give up his home and country and Mollie and the children, just to make us happy,

but he says he will be happy too. How am I to live up to him?' exclaimed the girl, in a tone of such loving reverence that it was a pity Gurth could not hear it.

'I think he is to be envied,' returned Valerie, smiling, 'for he will have the best little wife in the world. Pansy, my darling, you must not let a thought of me trouble your happiness; you know I have Ronald and Phil, and a snug little home of my own, and a certain dear generous child is sharing her income with me.'

'You know, Marmee, that Gurth wants you to have it all.'

'I know you are both utterly reckless and imprudent,' returned Valerie, laughing. 'No, Pansy, not a word on that subject. Ron's godfather is hurt that we have taken matters into our own hands with regard to the boy's education. I feel I ought not to be so proud with an old friend. Mrs. Walcott tells me that he has set his heart on sending Ron to Oxford.'

Pansy's eyes sparkled. 'You will not refuse, Marmee,' she said, breathlessly; 'think of Ronald.'

'I do think of him, and I shall not refuse,' returned Valerie slowly. 'I have been thinking over it for weeks, ever since the Dean talked to me, and I cannot let my pride stand in my boy's light. When you are gone I mean to tell him so. I think my hesitation in accepting his offer has disappointed him.'

'He is very fond of Ronald, Marmee, and he is so rich, and he has no children of his own.'

'No, and he would like my Ron to be a son to him. I had not meant to have told you this just yet, Pansy, but you may as well have all your good things together. Now, dearest, I am not going to let you talk any more. We shall have to be busy to-morrow, and get as much done as possible before Gurth's return; and you must

husband your strength.' And this argument was sufficiently potent to induce Pansy to seek the rest that she sorely needed.

On the whole, Pansy was wonderfully docile and submissive; but on one point she was firm. No amount of sensible argument on her step-mother's part could induce her to be married in her travelling dress.

'Gurth loved her to wear white,' she said, and more than once he had spoken of looking forward to the pleasure of seeing her in bridal array; and not for worlds would she disappoint him. The early hour, the empty cathedral, the rawness of a November morning, were nothing to her. Gurth's blue-eyed Princess would have her way.

'What do all those things matter'? she said indignantly, 'I am only dressing for Gurth's eyes; besides, it is the symbol that I love. I am going to wear my beautiful white silk dress that you gave me, Marmee, though only the old black rooks should admire me.'

Valerie yielded with a good grace when she found that Mrs. Walcott was on Pansy's side.

'Let the child have her way,' she said indulgently. 'A little while ago she would not have cared if she had been married in sackcloth. Her wish to wear bridal white is a healthy sign.'

'Yes, I know,' returned Valerie, 'I was only thinking of the difficulty'; but Mrs. Walcott soon convinced her there was none. Pansy could put on her travelling dress at the Deanery; there would be plenty of time to finish the packing before the midday train.

It was strange to think that Pansy would take off her finery in the very room where Valerie had dressed as a bride all those years ago. How vividly she remembered that day, and the blue-eyed child standing

by the toilet-table gazing at her in awe and admiration. 'One cannot have two mothers,' Pansy had said, 'I think I shall call you Marmee.' Could any girl have been happier that day? Could any husband have been more idolised? But at this point of her reflections Valerie shivered and roused herself.

Nothing is sadder in life than to stand by the grave of a dead love, or some moribund ideal, that has decayed and crumbled into dust before our eyes. Once it was living; we surrounded it with worshipping devotion, we laid garlands upon our altar, and sang our pitiful little hymns of praise. How had the change come, the blight, the bleak cold wind? the altar is bare, the garlands faded, and a grave yawns before us.

Hush! we will bury our dead past tenderly, tenderly, with reverence and decorum. Let us veil our faces, and tread softly, for where death is, 'it is holy ground.'

'Alban, I did love you,' whispered the widow, as she walked under the bare limes; 'if you had been all I thought you on my wedding morning, I should love you still; but now——' and here there was a strange soft glow in Valerie's eyes.

CHAPTER XLIII

IN GREY DECEMBER

The whole earth and the skies
Are illumed by altar candles,
Lit for blessed mysteries.—E. B. BROWNING.

NOTHING could have been more solemn and peaceful than that marriage service in the empty cathedral, and the sacred feast that followed it.

Outside lay the dark mist of a November morning, out of which straggled the bare creaking branches of the limes and elms. Darkness brooded over Wycombe as though the city still slept.

Inside the cathedral the dusky shadows hid chantries and pillars and stained windows, but the gloom of the nave only added to the brilliancy of the lighted choir and the altar with its glorious reredos.

Such a little group was gathered there, only Valerie and Ronald, and Mrs. Walcott and Mr. Nugent. Phil, trembling with pride and eagerness, was performing the duties of a little bridesmaid, but Gurth, standing there pale and wistful waiting for his bride, had no best man behind him.

Valerie almost started as the little white figure floated out of the darkness leaning on Dr. Franklin's

arm. There was something so child-like, so spiritualised and ethereal in Pansy's appearance, the soft white draperies seemed to envelop her like a mist. 'She looked like a little white angel,' Valerie said afterwards to her friend, but she was not the only one who was struck by the bride's rapt look and sweet expression. It was Gurth whose voice shook with emotion, Pansy's silver tones never faltered. 'Till death us do part,'—strangely solemn words. As she listened to them Valerie unconsciously raised her eyes and met Mr. Nugent's. His face looked set and white, and he was watching her with a fixed intensity that made her glance suddenly away. That look was to each a revelation, it was as though at that supreme moment they had looked into each other's soul.

When Pansy wrote her new name in the vestry she made Gurth come and look at it. 'Does it not look nice?' she whispered—'Pansy Fordham'; but there was a mist before Gurth's eyes that seemed to set the letters dancing on the page, and he could only press the little hand with its gold circlet.

'I am almost dazed with happiness,' were his first words as they drove to the Deanery.

The rooms looked bright and pleasant with fires and lights and the flower-decked breakfast-table, and the Dean's fatherly kindness and his wife's tact soon put them all at their ease; and in spite of the impending parting, it was impossible not to be cheerful. When the meal was over Valerie took Pansy upstairs, and no one followed them. The wedding-dress was carried off by Mrs. Walcott's maid, and she and her mistress finished the packing. Valerie had only to help Pansy put on her pretty dark-blue travelling-dress. They had plenty of time to talk, to exchange last words and

tender caresses, and through it all Valerie was brave for Pansy's sake. 'If I break down she will break down too,' she said to herself, and so she spoke cheerily and brightly of the time when Gurth should bring her back and they would be together again, but they both turned a little pale when they heard Gurth's footstep.

Valerie was the first to recover herself.

'Have you come to take your wife away, Gurth?' she asked, and then she held out her hands to him with the saddest, sweetest smile. 'Good-bye and God bless you, dear. You are my son now, remember that. Take care of my child and bring her back to me some day.'

'I will, I will, my dearest lady,' he returned, 'and heaven bless you too for all your goodness to me. Come, Sweetheart.'

'Go with your husband, my darling,' for Pansy was now clinging round her neck. 'One more kiss for the sake of the dear old days. Now take her, Gurth,' and then she put her gently in his arms, and closed the door behind them.

It was nearly an hour later when Mrs. Walcott came in search of her. Valerie was sitting by the window that overlooked the Deanery garden. She greeted her friend with an affectionate smile. 'Thank you, dear,' she said simply.

'Are you thanking me for leaving you alone?' returned Mrs. Walcott. 'My dear Valerie, one knows so well from one's own experience the relief and healing virtue of a silent hour.'

'It has done me good,' replied Valerie quietly, and in spite of her pale face and swollen eyelids she spoke with gentle resignation. 'It was better for us to part

here and not prolong the pain, and I know Gurth will soon comfort my child.'

'Alwyn was only remarking just now how beautifully Mr. Fordham managed,' observed Mrs. Walcott; 'he scarcely gave us time to kiss her, and the carriage drove off before Ronald could throw a slipper.'

'Dr. Franklin gave him a hint,' returned Valerie. 'Dear Pansy is so weak and excitable just now. Oh, Mrs. Walcott, even you cannot guess how thankful I am in spite of all this pain. I can trust her so fully to Gurth's care that I have no fear, although she is going to the other end of the world. I know how good he will be to her, and how she will learn to love him.'

'Dear Valerie, you are an example to us all. Now I want to know what you would like to do? Mr. Nugent has gone off and taken Philippa with him, but Ronald is here still. We should like you both to spend the remainder of the day with us. Indeed, I should love to have you, unless you prefer to go home.'

'I would rather go back to Roadside, if you do not think me ungrateful.'

'My dear, no. Of course I understand, and Alwyn shall order the carriage round at once. I shall come and see you to-morrow, but you will have Ronald with you to-day.'

Valerie soon found that her task that day would be to comfort Ronald. The boy was in very low spirits at parting from his sister. As he observed in schoolboy fashion, 'It was such a beastly distance to Australia that a fellow had no chance of getting at her. To be sure Fordham was a rattling good chap, and had given him a splendid tip,' and here Ronald opened his hand and showed five bright sovereigns

reposing on the palm, silent witnesses of Gurth's brotherly generosity.

There is nothing so helpful to ourselves in moments of depression as to strive to comfort others; and as Valerie set herself to cheer and amuse her boy, the weight at her own heart lessened. Mother and son talked together peacefully through the long afternoon, and Ronald heard with intense satisfaction of his godfather's generous proposal to send him to Oxford; his face fairly beamed with ecstasy. 'Oh, mother,' he exclaimed, 'what a brick the dear old Dean is. Isn't it just tipping?' and when Ronald went off to Carfax's that night he looked more than an inch taller.

During the next few weeks Valerie battled bravely with her depression. She devoted herself to Philippa, occupied herself as much as possible, and in the evening, when the sense of loneliness was too intense, she either read hard or wrote a little of the long diary letter that she had begun to Pansy, full of every little scrap of Wycombe news that she thought would interest her. When nearly a month had passed she received a letter from Aden.

Pansy wrote cheerfully. She had only been ill the first three days, and was becoming a good sailor. Gurth had taken such care of her, and had carried her up on the deck; indeed every line breathed her perfect content and trust.

'You have no idea how good my dear Gurth is to me, Marmee,' she wrote, 'every day I love and reverence him more. I tell him I shall be a better woman for marrying him. I am sure of that. He simply has not a mean or selfish thought,' and then followed a few tender childlike sentences.

Evidently Gurth had taken the pen out of his wife's

hand to add a postscript, 'I tell Pansy that I have got my little Eyebright back, and indeed my wife looks so well and rosy that I get prouder of her every day. We are very happy ; indeed, sometimes I almost tremble to think how little I deserve my blessings ; and morning, noon, and night we talk of our dearest lady and all that we owe to her.' Valerie took this letter down to the Deanery. She wanted to read part of it to Mrs. Walcott, the greater portion was only for her own eyes, but she knew how fully her kind friend would rejoice in Pansy's happiness.

It was a bitterly cold afternoon, the nipping north wind threatened snow. But no weather, however inclement, could keep Valerie indoors. She had plenty of warm furs, and her thoroughly healthy organisation rendered her invulnerable to atmospheric influences ; indeed, she delighted in being out when more self-indulgent people kept close to their firesides.

Perhaps some secret restlessness made movement indispensable to her. The small low rooms of the Roadside caravan still oppressed her, and her long walks with Phil were her greatest refreshment.

To-day Phil was left at home to bake tea-cakes with Phebe—one of her greatest treats, and Valerie set out alone to battle with the wind, her spirits rising every moment with the exhilaration of the contest.

Very few people were out that afternoon, the heavy leaden skies were not inviting ; the elms and limes looked grim and black with their straining branches as Valerie passed under them. She saw the ground was strewn with broken twigs. She was out of breath and almost rosy from exercise when she reached the Deanery, and Mrs. Walcott had not the heart to scold her.

'You know you ought not to have come out in such a day,' she said reproachfully, 'and directly I have heard your news I mean to send you away; indeed I am serious,' as Valerie gave a wilful smile. 'Alwyn says we shall have a heavy fall of snow in another hour's time. The clouds are as low as possible now,' and even Valerie agreed that it would be foolish to linger. She imparted her news as quickly as possible, and received her friend's cordial congratulations.

'I like the way Pansy expresses herself,' observed Mrs. Walcott, 'she is as quaint and childlike as ever, but there is a softer and more womanly tone. Now, my dear Valerie, if I am to have a moment's peace this evening you must really let me send you away. It is getting darker every instant,' and then Valerie, who had no wish to be weather-bound at the Deanery, kissed her hastily and took her departure.

The wind had lulled, but the cold was intense, and already a few flakes of snow were falling. Although it was not yet four o'clock it was almost as dark as night, and the few gas-lamps glimmered faintly in the distance. The whole scene was weird and gloomy, like one of Gustave Doré's pictures; and as Valerie walked down the lime avenue she could hardly trace the path, and more than once she came in contact with a tree trunk.

The snowflakes were whirling round her faster than ever, and she began to feel bewildered. Was she still in the avenue, or had she diverged into one of the side walks that intersected the cathedral green? In that darkness it would be quite possible to lose one's bearings. She had heard her husband say that he had once perambulated the cathedral green for about two hours in a heavy snowstorm, and had been unable to find his way to his own door.

Valerie was beginning to wish herself at home, and to own that Mrs. Walcott would have been right in blaming her for foolhardiness; then the soft thud of footsteps behind her made her feel nervous—she was naturally fearless—but no one, however brave, would like to be followed by some invisible person.

Valerie felt her heart beat a little faster. Then she tried to walk on more rapidly. A sudden crackling overhead hardly attracted her notice, but the next moment a hand gripped her arm, and she was dragged backward so roughly that she staggered and nearly fell, and something hard and heavy struck against her.

'Good heavens you might have been killed!' exclaimed an agitated voice that she recognised. 'Valerie'—as she leant against that friendly arm in the darkness, giddy and palpitating with the sudden shock—'are you hurt? Did that branch touch you?'

'It has not hurt me in the least, thanks to you,' she returned almost in a whisper. 'Mr. Nugent, you have saved my life,' for the huge limb that had fallen quite blocked the path, and Valerie's words were no exaggeration. It had been a moment of deadly peril, and but for Mr. Nugent's presence of mind she must have had a terrible blow.

'Do not let us stand here,' she continued in a trembling voice, 'it is not safe,' then he put her hand in his arm.

'Are you sure you are fit to walk?' he asked in a tone so anxious that Valerie smiled as she heard it. 'Shall I take you back to the Deanery? We are close by.' So she was not in the right path after all.

'No, no, please let me go home,' and then she added nervously, 'but I must not take you out of your way.'

'Our ways lie together to-night,' he returned, with that quiet decision that is so reassuring to a woman's ear. Possibly Valerie detected some new intonation in the pleasant voice, a touch of peremptoriness as though Mr. Nugent had taken matters into his own hands. Any way, she held her peace.

The storm was increasing, and the white feathery snowflakes pelted them softly as they walked, but Valerie felt no discomfort; a strong subtle sense of warmth and happiness seemed infused into her being; he had saved her life, but for his strong hand and God's good providence, Ronald's mother might be now lying, stunned or crippled, or even fatally injured in that lonely lime avenue. She might have lain there for hours,—and then, as imagination conjured up a ghastly picture, Valerie shuddered involuntarily from head to foot.

The next moment Mr. Nugent bent down to her. They had left the lighted streets and were in the dark country road that led to Roadside. It was not possible to see each other's face.

'Are you afraid?' he asked tenderly. 'Indeed, there is no cause, I know every step of the way. We are not far from Roadside now.'

'Oh no, I am not afraid,' she whispered, but she could say no more, for a strange shyness and timidity seemed to seal her lips. How could she tell him that she felt as safe with him as a child feels who is holding its mother's hand; that when she was near him the sense of protection was so great that she felt no ill could touch her; but a lover, like a friend, can finish a broken sentence; and Marmaduke Nugent could read this woman's heart like print.

'You are safe with me,' he replied in a tone of

intense but restrained emotion. 'Valerie, if it be your will, our paths shall lie together from this night. As far as a man's power can avail to shield and protect the woman he loves and worships, I will do my utmost to keep all harm from you. Can you trust yourself to my care, dearest?'

There was a moment's silence, so still and deep that Valerie could hear the beating of her own heart. They were standing on the path, pelted by the cold, noiseless snowflakes, and shut in a world of their own, but neither of them were conscious of their strange surroundings. Marmaduke's suspense was so great that he almost held his breath. Had he deceived himself? Had he asked too much? Could he really expect that this sweet woman could give him the inestimable blessing of her love? The next moment the clear silvery tones that were like music to him greeted his ears.

'I have been very lonely, and you are so good to me, I know you will make me happy'; and in the darkness, Valerie crept closer to him; she had found her rightful mate at last, and she knew it; and in her noble sincerity and truth she owned it at once.

'God bless you for this, my beloved,' was all Marmaduke said; for such happiness as he and Valerie felt was best expressed by silence.

In visionary Edens there are blue skies and bright sunshine, balmy breezes and the sweet perfume of flowers; but when Valerie entered her woman's kingdom it was through a blinding snowstorm and darkness that might be felt.

But if the heavens had rained roses on them they could not have been more utterly content; however happy their life might be in the future, neither she

nor Marmaduke Nugent would ever live through such moments again ; for when two hearts first draw together it is as though a door were set open in heaven, and faint strains of celestial harmonies float down to earth.

CHAPTER XLIV

HER 'GOODLY HERITAGE'

'In life, in death, whate'er betide,
I could not now the gift recall,
Dear love, for I have given thee all:
Thank God, He set me at thy side.'
HELEN MARION BURNSIDE.

VALERIE felt as though she were in a dream as she stood in the narrow passage of Roadside, while Mr. Nugent carefully removed her drenched furs, and Phil pranced round them with small dancing steps.

'You look like two great white Polar bears,' she exclaimed ecstatically; 'but Marmee is the whitest.'

'Stand back, little woman,' returned her father, laughingly. 'We are far too wet to be touched until we have got rid of all this snow. You had better put on something dry,' he continued in an undertone; and his quiet tone of authority gave Valerie an exquisite thrill of pleasure, it told her that she belonged to him, and that he meant to take good care of his new possession. It did not need his whispered 'Do not be long, love' to bring that blush to her cheek.

Long! when her hands were trembling with the haste she made. It might have been a girl in her teens apparelling herself for her lover instead of a grave,

sedate widow of thirty-four. Only once she lingered, as she stood before the glass, smoothing her disordered hair, and then she looked at her reflected image with some amazement.

Could this fair woman be herself? Never, even in her earlier days, had she looked more lovely. The pure creamy complexion was glowing with colour, the deep eyes had a new light in them, and Valerie blushed with pleasure to see her own beauty.

'It is for him,' she murmured, 'my own Marmaduke, for his sake I want to be young and fair.' But as she entered the room, and Marmaduke rose eagerly from his seat to meet her, his eyes told her what he thought, and Valerie's graceful head drooped for a moment as she took her place at her little tea-table.

It was a very quiet meal—the child's presence was a restraint; but the quiet looks exchanged between the lovers were as eloquent as speech. To Marmaduke Nugent it was simply happiness to sit by Valerie's side in the warm snug room, and to realise that his loneliness was over. He had loved his poor Louise, and had done his duty to her nobly, but his affection for her was nothing compared to his love for Valerie. It was the worship of a good true man for a woman whom he knew was worthy of reverence, who would never disappoint him, or go back from her plighted word. A woman whose sympathies were wide and deep, whose even tranquillity would give him just the rest he needed.

It was at this point of his reflections that Phil broke in with her childish demands. She explained with much volubility that she and Phebe were making ginger-bread snaps, and that she was anxious to find out if they were nearly baked. She had finished her

tea and she wished Marmee would let her go to Phebe.

'Of course you may go, darling,' returned Valerie in her soft motherly tones; and then a sudden sense of shyness at being left alone with her lover made her cross the room in search of her work, but she was soon followed, and the strong arms that an hour ago had drawn her out of danger were now holding her fast.

'At last, my beloved,' he said, and then he kissed her.

Presently they were sitting together quietly, hand in hand. Marmaduke had been pouring out his heart to her, and Valerie had trembled at finding herself so beloved. 'You must not put me on a pedestal,' she said to him with her radiant smile. 'I only want to be beside you—to be your friend and helper.'

'You shall be my wife as soon as you will consent to marry me,' he returned fervently. Then Valerie looked at him appealingly.

'Marmaduke,' she said softly, and how it thrilled him to hear his name from her dear lips, and, perhaps, that was why she said it. 'Marmaduke, it must not be soon.'

'Not soon, love!'

'No,' and now her manner was somewhat agitated? 'I—I knew what was coming, and I hoped that you would not have spoken just yet. It is only fifteen months since my husband died'—and here her voice broke a little—then he put her hand to his lips.

'Dearest,' he said tenderly, 'do not distress yourself. I will ask nothing, and take nothing as a right. You have given me your love, and have made me the proudest and happiest man in the world. I can afford to be patient.'

'And you will wait?' Valerie put the question with wistful gentleness.

'Yes, love, I will wait, can you doubt it?' but his tone was beseeching in its earnestness. 'But you must be merciful, and not keep me waiting too long; remember Phil wants her mother, the Old House wants its mistress, and I want my wife'—and how much he wanted her, Marmaduke Nugent did not say, but Valerie could guess.

. . . .

It was some days before Valerie found courage to impart her news to her kind friends at the Deanery. As far as she was concerned, she would have gladly told no one. She would have hoarded her precious secret, and kept it in her own bosom, but she owed too much to them. If she had been less nervous and self absorbed, she would have perceived Mrs. Walcott's keen look at her, and the smile that crossed her face as she tried to begin her story; but she did not get far, for Mrs. Walcott soon interrupted her hesitating and halting speech.

'Dear Valerie,' she said sympathetically—'you need not be afraid of us—I know quite well what you are trying to tell me. Mr. Nugent has spoken to you, and you have accepted him, and Alwyn and I are delighted.'

Valerie's sweet face lost its troubled look. 'You have guessed, both of you; how could you?—how could you? I thought no one knew.'

'No one who did not love you very dearly. Shall I tell you something, Valerie? Months ago Alwyn said to me that he was sure Mr. Nugent cared for you—that he had seen his face in the cathedral once when he was watching you. "It was a revelation," those were his very words. "I don't suppose Valerie has an idea

of it, but that man worships the very ground she walks on," and then he rubbed his hands. You know his way when he is very much pleased about anything. "He is the very man for her, he has the strong intellect and the firm will and the good heart that she needs. She will be able to look up to him." I shall never forget those words, and how they almost took my breath away.'

'I am glad the Dean approves,' replied Valerie in a relieved tone. 'Indeed, indeed Marmaduke is all he thinks him, he is above me in everything.'

'That is what we women want,' returned her friend, smiling. 'We like to do our own little bit of worship too.' But her smile died away when she heard of Valerie's peril that evening.

'My dear, I feel as though I should never forgive myself for letting you go back alone,' she said with tears in her eyes. 'Alwyn was quite vexed with me when he found you had left the house, but you were in good hands. Valerie, there is one thing I want to know, will the marriage take place soon? Mr. Nugent's house is ready, and there is no reason to wait.'

'It will not be before September,' returned Valerie hastily. 'I told Marmaduke that I could not marry him until the two years were up.'

'Of course you know best, dear, and Mr. Nugent will doubtless be guided by your wishes.'

'Yes, he is so good about it—he had hoped for Easter—but I could not bring myself to do it. Mrs. Walcott, I do not want any one to know except you and the Dean, it will be far better to keep it quiet. Phil is such a baby, she will not notice, and I do not mean to tell Ronald yet.'

'You will tell Pansy?'

'Oh yes, I will not hide it from Pansy. I know how pleased she will be. We have made all our plans. We shall be married quietly in town, and then Marmaduke will take me to Switzerland, and Fraulein will have charge of Phil.'

'Yes; and Ronald will come to us, he is Alwyn's adopted son; you must not forget that—ah, here comes Alwyn, and we must tell him the news.' But as the Dean congratulated her, and solemnly blessed her, Valerie grew pale, and trembled.

'Happiness is such a responsibility,' she said afterwards to her friend, 'it is a great talent.'

'You may well say so,' observed Mrs. Walcott thoughtfully. 'I realised it for the first time when I became Alwyn's wife, and I have felt it ever since. My dear Valerie, we are both happy women, and our lines have fallen to us in pleasant places.'

'Yes,' returned Valerie in a low voice, 'but life has not always been smooth. I have worn my rue with a difference and so has Pansy, but now we have our "goodly heritage."' And then a glad light came into her eyes; the old lonely days, with their unsatisfied cravings were over, and the future stretched out fair before her, for she knew and gloried in the knowledge that if Heaven willed it every step of the way would be trodden by Marmaduke Nugent's side.

THE END

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